

John Thomas George Archer

Private

35372

6th Battalion, Kings Shropshire Light Infantry



Rushock Dingle is a beautiful valley nestling between Rushock and Bradnor Hills, just off the road from Kington to Presteign. The Dingle was where generations of Archers called home and it was here in 1871 that George Archer was born. George worked as an agricultural labourer at Rushock Farm and in an 1892 civil ceremony married Eliza Hunt, a young lady from Credenhill on the outskirts of Hereford. Initially George and Eliza set up home in Monkland, outside Leominster and it was here, in 1899, John Thomas George Archer was born along with a twin sister, Mary Emma Elizabeth. The family were soon to relocate to Luston where on 25th June 1900, a second sister for John arrived, Emily Georgina Lydia. The 1901 census reveals that George and his family were settled in Post Office Road, Luston where George was working as a plate layer on the railway. Luston is situated on the main railway line between Ludlow and Leominster and Georges job would have been to maintain and inspecting the railway line in the Luston area. Life in the early 1900's was tough and this apparent domestic idyl was soon to be shattered by a succession of personal, devastating tragedies.

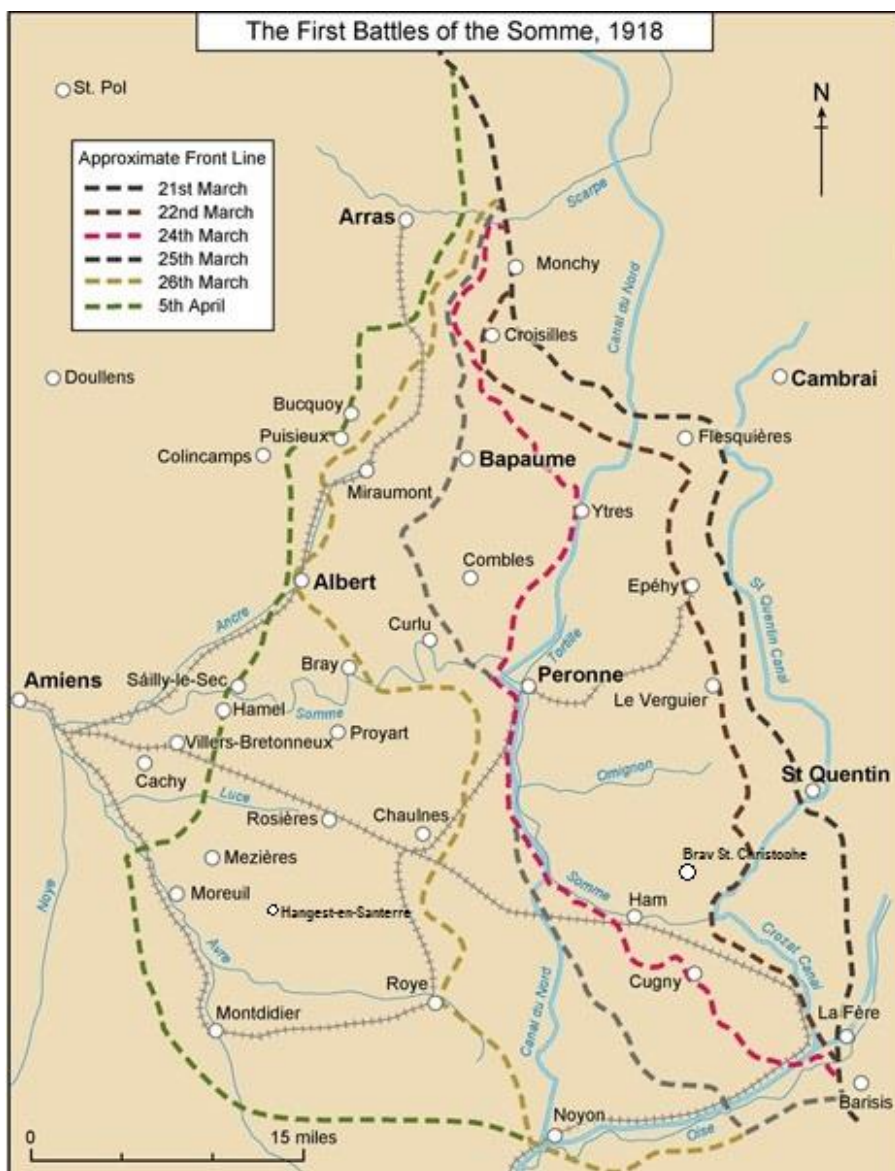
Death records indicate that in early 1902 Mary, at the age of just two, died. However, in the same quarter of 1902, this tragic event was countered by the birth of Margaret Alice Archer and her twin sister Susan Helen. One can speculate that the loss of Mary brought on early labour for Eliza and shortly after their births both Margaret and Susan also passed away. Eliza and George had lost three of their baby girls all within the space of just three months, the torment

and suffering the Archer family went through can only be imagined. But sadness is often balanced by happiness and the following year in 1903, William Hunt Archer was born. But this poor family were dealt the cruelest of hands in the cardgame of life and baby William was also destined not to enjoy a long life when he too passed away when just six months old. The family must have been traumatised by this sequence of tragic events, all happening in such quick succession.

It is worth noting here that at some point John decided to go by his second name Thomas, hence he is recorded on Kington War Memorial as Thomas Archer. This reversal of name was not uncommon although surviving official documents understandably use his birth name. Thankfully, following these unbelievable sequence of tragedies, the Archer family enjoyed a period of relative stability. Georges parents moved out of Rushock Dingle to Golden Bank above Rushock. It was here that Thomas senior passed away in 1909, aged 81. This left Georges mother alone and isolated on Golden Bank, a situation which led him to move his depleted family into his mothers house the following year. Sadly Emma did not survive her husband long and in the third quarter of 1910 she too passed away, aged 73. The 1911 census reveals that George, Eliza, Thomas and Emily were living on Golden Bank and that the two children were going to school in Kington, Thomas attending Kington Boys School on Gravel Hill. There is a saying which states 'a rolling stone gathers no moss' and in 1912 George and the family were on the move again, decamping and moving across the hills to the idyllic farm setting of Gorsty Doles, just above Titley, where George was employed as a farm labourer on the Eywood Estate. So, at last it appeared all was settled, the family had relocated to Gorsty Doles and young Thomas was attending school in Kington, however, the dark clouds of war were approaching.

War was declared with Germany in August 1914. Thomas, still a child, was far too young to enlist. But the war that should have been over by Christmas rumbled on and all too soon Thomas was of fighting age. Regretably, very few of his service records survive but from those which do we learn that he initially enlisted at Leominster and joined the 57th Training Reserve Battalion as Private TR/4/1906 Archer. During the early part of the war infantry regiments had trained their own reserves with recruits being posted to battalion training units before being transferred to an active service unit when ready. With the introduction of conscription in March 1916 huge numbers of recruits arrived at individual battalions. They could not cope and on 1st September 1916 a major reorganisation of army training was undertaken. The Training Reserve were formed whereby all new recruits went into a dedicated training system, from which they were forwarded to their allocated regiments as battle prepared soldiers. Hence Thomas initially joined the 57th Training Reserve where he undertook his basic training. The 57th Training Reserve were based at Kinmel Park just south of Rhyl on the north Wales coast and effectively took over training responsibilities for the 9th (Reserve) Battalion of the South Wales Borderers. Further reorganisation took place on 27th October 1917 when the 57th

Training Reserve became the 52nd (Graduated) Battalion. From Thomas's records we know he joined the 57th Training Reserve so we can surmise he enlisted after 1st September 1916 but before 27th October 1917. Each Training Reserve were allocated 4000 service numbers, Thomas's was TR/4/1906 so it is fairly safe to suggest he enlisted around March/April 1917. Thomas was just eighteen and officially men could not serve on active service overseas until they were nineteen, for Thomas this meant early 1918. Once fully trained, and old enough, the record shows he was transferred into the 6th Battalion, The Kings Shropshire Light Infantry (KSLI) as Private 35372 Archer. Without Thomas's service record it is hard to say when this actually was but we know he fought on the Western Front with 'A' Company, 6th Battalion KSLI which formed part of 60 Infantry Brigade, 20th Light Division.



To better understand what Thomas entered into it would be useful to set in context the fighting on the Western Front in early 1918. 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. The Germans planned a major Spring Offensive, codename 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 the speed of advance of the Germans, they outstripped their ability to resupply and the charge petered out at Villers-Bretonneux to the east of Amiens. The awful irony of the Battle of St. Quentin 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 had 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. The counter offensive started on the 21st August and rolled into the Hundred Day Offensive, the allied advance which effectively pushed the Germans out of France and brought an end to the war on 11th November 1918. So, with this overview of the extensive fighting in 1918 in mind, I will now turn attention more directly to the 6th Battalion the Kings Shropshire Light Infantry and examine what happened to them and more particularly Thomas, during the German's headlong advance to the coast.

By combining information from the battalion war diary and the excellent book, *History of the Kings Shropshire Light Infantry in the Great War 1914-1918*, edited by Major W de B. Wood, it is possible to shed light upon Thomas's last moments. On the map above, Cugny and Ham can be seen in the bottom right corner, on the left of the German advance. This was the area the 6th KSLI were located during March 1918. From 6th March the battalion had been billeted at Cugny, the men employed digging and repairing trenches at Annois and Ollezy to the north of Cugny, well behind the front lines. The allies were aware of a strong German buildup which presaged an imminent attack and in preparation the battalion were allocated Bray St. Christophe as their area of operation.

The German advance started on the 21st March and the 6th KSLI were advanced to a holding point in a quarry outside Bray St. Christophe. At 11:15pm, the men moved forward to their allocated defensive line which ran from the St Quentin Canal near Happencourt, north west toward Hill 100 at Fluquieres. The included modern map below shows these defensive positions, with Ham in the bottom left corner and Bray St. Christophe in the centre. As the battalion faced the enemy the disposition of Companies was as follows. 'C' on the right of the line covering the Happencourt/Tugny road, 'B' were in the centre of the line, 'D' were on the left of the line at Hill 100. 'A' company, including Thomas, were held in support just ahead of Bray St. Christophe, ready to respond to changing events. At 1:30 pm on March 22nd the enemy attacked the KSLI line. Such was the ferocity of the advance that all along the line extreme pressure was exerted. At 3.50pm the line came under intense artillery fire and the advancing enemy troops were additionally assisted by low flying aeroplanes firing machine guns down onto the 6th Battalion and dropping bombs into their trenches.



The advancing enemy achieved a circling action, crossing the canal at Artemps on the right and squeezing 'B' and 'C' Company's. Meanwhile on the left flank the enemy were advancing around 'D' Company, driving into the battalions left flank. Such was the aggression of the enemy assault on both flanks of the battalions frontline, platoons were isolated and despite ferocious defence were taken prisoner. The centre held their position in spite of the intensity of the advance. The pressure exerted by the German's was unsustainable and by late afternoon the battalion frontline was in full retreat. A message from HQ ordered all troops to retire over the Somme River with the 20th Division providing a rear-guard defence before themselves retiring to a line from Bray St. Christophe to Douilly north west of Bray. 60 Brigade, including the three KSLI front line companies, began retiring at 7:30pm. However, in spite of the general retreat, 'A' Company, did not move. Their Commanding Officer stated he would not respond to the verbal order he had received, demanding a written order before he would retire his Company. Thomas and 'A' Company stood their ground.

About this time a platoon of German soldiers approached Thomas's position, heading down a sunken lane from Happencourt. The war diary records they were in 'high spirits and undoubtedly not expecting to come across any British troops'. 'A' Company's Lewis gunners opened fire making the advancing troops scatter for their lives. The officer commanding 'A' Company received his written order and under the cover of a thick mist, retired his Company without incident. The reluctant Company re-joined the rest of the battalion who were spread on a line from Bray St. Christophe to Aubigny. At 11pm on the 22nd 60 Brigade were ordered to continue their retirement in good order, but before they could move the enemy again attacked and breached parts of the KSLI defensive line. A counter attack was organised on the left at Aubigny but the ferocity of the enemy attack forced the men back. 'B' Company became isolated and indeed nearly all

men were taken prisoner. The fate of the rest of the battalion was not so testing and they managed to continue their retreat, all be it in a modicum of disorder. They crossed the Somme at Ham and regrouped in relative safety on the eastern bank. Such was the chaos of retreat that the battalion became separated from 60 Brigade only managing to rejoin them on the 24th March. 6th Battalion the Kings Shropshire Light Infantry was relieved by a unit of the French army on the 28th March and withdrawn from the frontline. The whole of 60 Brigade regrouped at Hangest-en-Santerre, about 25 miles east of Ham and the fighting.

On the 29th 60 Brigade were ordered to retire still further and while undertaking this order the 6th KSLI were singled out to support the 59th Brigade at Meziers, north-west of Hangest, where the 59th had come under intense pressure. It was during this conflict, at about 2:30pm on the 29th March, that battalion Commander, Lt-Colonel Welch, was mortally wounded by a piece of shrapnel and died 15 minutes later, near Villers-aux-Erables. The battalion were again involved in aggressive fighting on the 31st, south east of Domart. All this intense fighting, and the resultant high attrition rate during the Battle of St. Quentin, meant the 20th Division was left unfit for combat. It was relieved on the 2nd April. Private John Thomas George Archer was **killed in action** during the Battle of St. Quentin, some time between the **21st March and 1st April 1918**. The exact circumstances of his demise are unknown, and his body was never recovered, his death is commemorated on panel 60 of the Pozieres Memorial.



Pozieres is a small village four miles from the town of Albert. The memorial encloses the Pozieres British Cemetery located to the south-west of the village. The memorial panels are positioned on the stone rubble perimeter wall and the dead are commemorated by regiment. The names on the memorial are exclusively from the German Spring Offensive period, March-April 1918. 14,000 British casualties are commemorated, almost all lost in that desperate two-month period when allied forces attempted to repel the might of the German army.

Thomas had lost his life fighting for his country and freedom, but for his family in Kington his loss must have been unbearable. However, as was ever the case, life had to go on. For a time after the war George worked for a Robert Bach at Upper House Farm, Lyonshall. A bereavement in the Archer family meant Woodhouse Farm on the Kingswood Road became available and George and Eliza moved

there, paying rent to the family trust fund. They farmed the land until 1920 at which time George decided to rent the land to adjacent farmers as grazing land. Between 1923-1928 George was a school cleaner while continuing to work as a farm labourer. Money was clearly tight and a conflict ensued with the executors of the Archer estate when George failed to pay his rent for a year. They took him to court in July 1929. George and Eliza moved out and went to live in Rose Cottage in Lyonshall. On the 26th October official bankruptcy proceedings were started with 'inability to pay legal costs incurred due to a family squabble over rent at Woodhouse, Kingswood Road', being cited as the reason. The case was concluded in December 1929 and George was declared bankrupt. Destitute and disillusioned George and Eliza moved away from Kington and settled over the border in Wales. Eliza passed away in 1947 and George in 1952. As for Emily, Thomas's only surviving sibling, she married George Clarke in a 1923 Kington wedding and went to live with her new husband in Holmesmarsh, Lyonshall. It is possible this was at Rose Cottage where Eliza and George, her parents, went to live after the Woodhouse debacle.

After Thomas's death his final military accounts were made up and on the 4th August 1918 his father received £4 13s 4d, the proceeds of his final pay account. On 29th November 1919, a further £3 War Gratuity, was advanced to George. Thomas's death was worth just £7 13s 4d, but he was also awarded the Victory and British War Medals in honour of his short service for King and Country and his name was read out at the Kington Peace Service held at St. Mary's Church, Kington on 6th July 1919. Thomas never lived in Kington but he did attend Kington Boy's School where his name was recorded on the school's magnificent memorial scroll. Thomas was just 19 when he died but because his name is recorded on Kington War Memorial his bravery and sacrifice will be remembered forever.

