

John Baker

Sergeant

201655

3rd/4th Battalion, Queen's Own (Royal West Kent Regiment)



This story does not begin with the man whose name appears on Kington war memorial but with his father, also John Baker, who was a draper's assistant originally from Hanley in Staffordshire. He arrived in Kington about 1880 and took up lodgings at 17&18 Duke Street. His landlady was a widower called Sarah Morris who lived in the house with her daughter, Mary Jane. The 1881 census informs us that Sarah is a Grocer and John was employed as a clerk in a draper's shop. Living under the same roof it was not long before love blossomed between John and Mary and later that same year we learn that John Baker married Mary Jane Morris in the Herefordshire town of Kington. John and Mary continued living at 17&18 Duke Street but at some point, perhaps upon retirement, Sarah moved out of the house and took up residence next door at number 19.

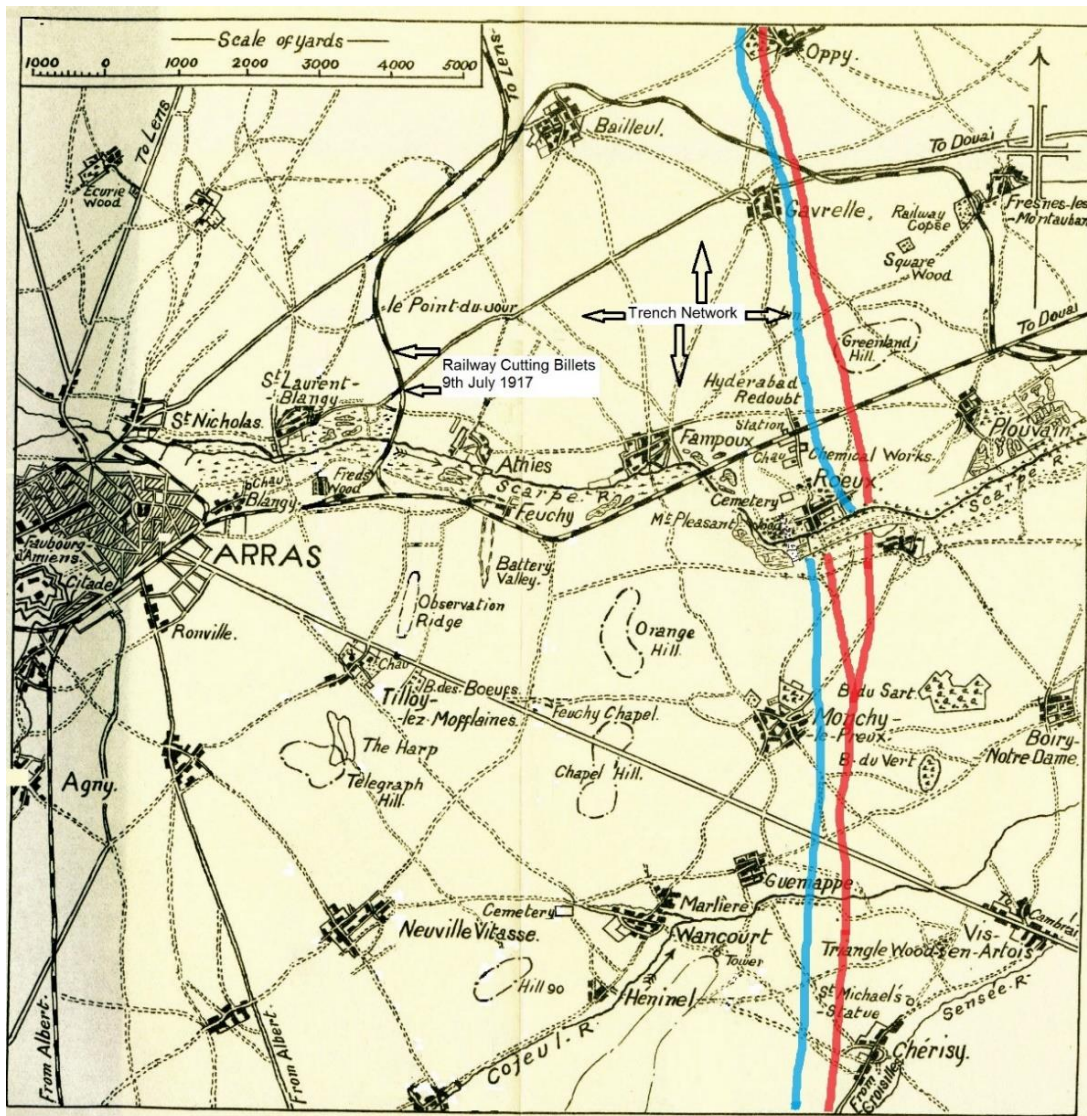
So, our young couple are establishing a home in Duke Street and a year after their marriage they proudly brought their first child, William John Baker, into the world, swiftly followed in 1884 by a second son Alfred Morris Baker. The family continues to grow and in the spring of 1886, the focus of this biography, John Baker arrived, followed in 1889 by a daughter and the baby of the family, Hannah Dorothy. The 1891 census reveals that John senior was then working as an Ironmongers Clerk and it transpires that this is at Meredith Ironmongers at No3 High Street. William, Alfred and John all attended Kington Boy's School on Gravel Hill and clearly this provides a good educational grounding for them and for their future employment. On the 31st

March 1901, that years census date, the whole family are still happily living at 17&18 Duke Street. John senior is still working as a clerk at Meredith's Ironmongers, William is employed as a tailor, Alfred a solicitor's clerk and at the tender age of 14, John junior is employed as a grocer's apprentice. It is not long after this that the boys start to spread their wings and in the 1911 census we discover that John junior has moved away from Kington and is boarding at 60 Balshall Heath, Birmingham where his landlord is an Ernest Thurston, a glass silverer. While John, who is still single, is recorded as a 'traveller'. Now this is not a Romany traveller but indeed a travelling salesman for a company called Messrs. Robertson and Son of Paisley. By investigating this company, we discover that Messrs. Robertson and Son was none other than Robertson's who make marmalade and fruit preserves to this day. John Baker was indeed a preserves salesman for Robertson's the marmalade manufacturer and at the time of his death had established himself in Malvern.

With war breaking out in August 1914 the first men into the fray were regular, professional soldiers. It soon became apparent that more men were required and a call to arms was put out for volunteers with many thousands of men, young and old, answering that call. Kitchener's new Army evolved. But even this huge influx of men proved to be insufficient for containing the German might and even more drastic measures were required. In March 1916 conscription began. It is interesting to note that John enlisted in February 1916 thus having answered the call to arms and avoiding the agony of conscription. Few of John's service papers survive but we know that he enlisted in Malvern and initially joined the Somerset Light Infantry as Private 74496 Baker. At some point, possibly following initial training, John was transferred to the 3rd/4th Battalion, the Queen's Own (Royal West Kent Regiment), where his service number changed to, Private 201655 John Baker. John was not a young man in 1916, 30 in fact, and would have been surrounded by young, keen but green, fighting men. Advancement was swift for John and soon he attained the rank of Sergeant and as such became the senior NCO in a platoon of men. The 3rd/4th Battalion had been formed in June 1915 as a Territorial Battalion and first landed in France on the 1st June 1917. The record shows that their attachment, which Brigade/Division they fought under, was a little itinerant initially. Firstly, they were attached to the 1st South African Brigade of the 9th (Scottish) Division and subsequently the 103rd Brigade of the 34th Division. Eventually on the 22nd June 1917 they were transferred to the 52nd Brigade of the 17th (Northern) Division. We must now turn to the official war diary of the 3rd/4th Battalion of the Queen's Own (Royal West Kent Regiment) to discover what they were doing during the summer of 1917.

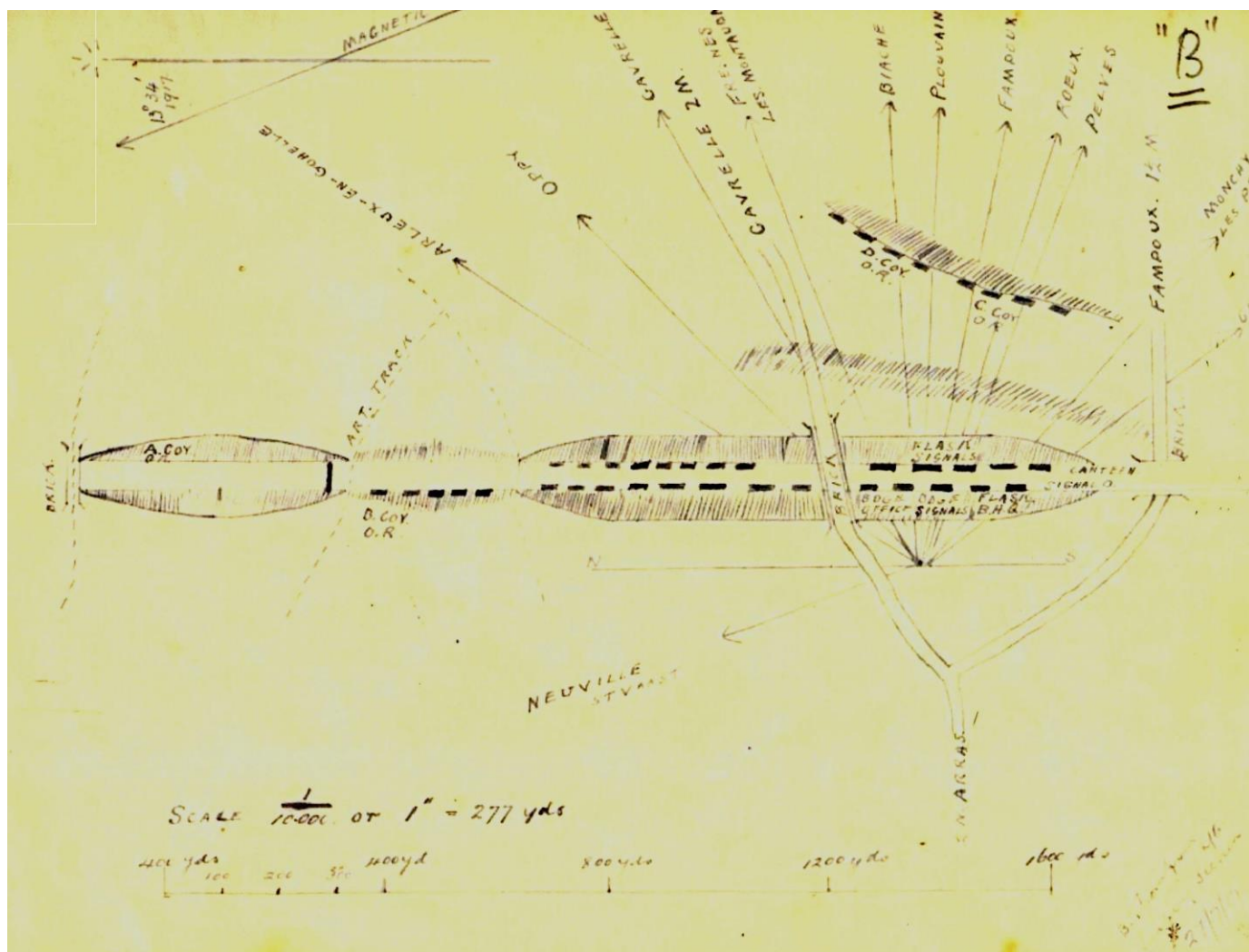


At 1am on the 31st May 1917 the 3rd/4th Battalion the West Kent Regiment boarded trains at Canterbury and moved to Southampton for embarkation to France. At Southampton 34 officers and 928 men boarded ship and at 6pm sailed for Le Havre arriving at 7:45am on the morning of 1st June 1917. Here they entrained and alighted at the town of Hesdin on the outskirts of Etaples on 3rd June. From here they marched to billets in Wamin. At 10am on the 6th they entrained again and were moved to Duisans, a small village to the north west of Arras, and then marched a few miles north to Etrun, all the while moving nearer the front. Here they settled and got themselves organised, until the 18th when they first went into the trenches for familiarisation training with seasoned regiments. The regiment took its first casualties on the 20th with two other ranks being killed and three injured. In the early hours of the 22nd they were relieved and moved back into camp at St. Nicholas on the northern outskirts of Arras. Life at the front was not all trench work and on the 26th June the battalion were employed on fatigues digging a communications cable trench. Normal order was resumed on the night of the 29th when the battalion were again moved back into the trenches. Such was the transient demand for men in the front line that the 3rd/4th Battalion were dispersed, by companies, to various positions centred around Gavrelle, north east of Arras.



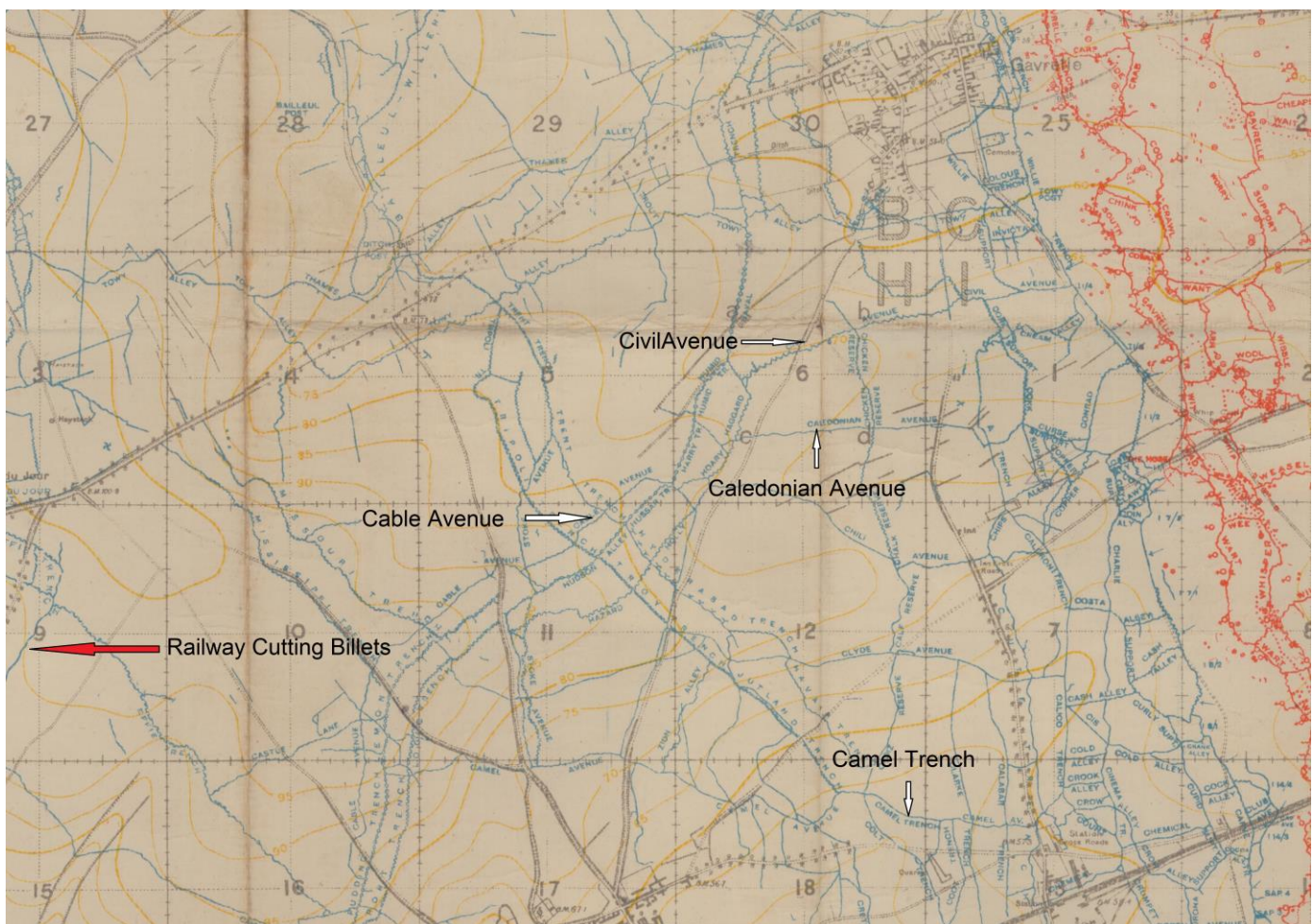
Casualties and deaths started to rise alarmingly. The contemporaneous map on the previous page shows where the frontline was relative to Arras in July 1917. Blue indicates Allied positions and red German. Behind the allied frontline a network of interlinking communications and support trenches crisscrossed the landscape all the way back to Arras.

On the 1st July a small working party was sent to work with a New Zealand tunnelling company near the Chemical Works at Roeux, which can be seen on the included map, centre right. Meanwhile their chums in C&D Companies were in the front lines taking casualties. On the 4th July A&B Companies relieved C&D Companies and were placed under the command of the 7th Border Regiment and 8th South Staffordshire Regiment respectively. Not until the 8th July was the whole battalion back together again when they were moved out of the trenches back to St. Nicholas. On the 9th their role at the front changed from one of an infantry battalion of the 52nd Brigade to that of the pioneering battalion for the 17th Division. Pioneering battalions were there to undertake heavy work and projects required at Division level, thus ensuring the smooth running of operations. For the 3rd/4th Royal West Kent Regiment this primarily meant working on communications trenches, repairing and improving them following enemy artillery action. The effectiveness and



importance of communications trenches cannot be over stated and a complex network of trenches developed around Arras which were vital for the support of infantry in the front lines. These trenches were key to moving men and materials such as munitions, food, water etc., speedily and effectively toward the front and for exhausted and injured men to be evacuated back to safety. Their importance inevitably meant they were often targeted by enemy artillery and hence required constant maintenance. On the evening of the 9th July the battalion ensconced themselves into a railway cutting on the outskirts of Arras, not too far from the fighting but in a relatively sheltered location. This position is identified on the map above and the included hand drawn sketch, taken from the regimental diary which shows the battalions distribution within the cutting.

As part of their new role they became responsible for anti-aircraft activities for the 52nd Brigade, taking charge of five Lewis Gun emplacements, where the men spent much of their time searching the skies for targets. On the 12th July they received instructions as to which communications trenches they had been allocated for repair and improvement. Four key trenches were targeted, Civil, Caledonian, Cable and Camel. These can be identified on the incredibly detailed trench map below. Closer inspection of the map shows that all trenches in this sector were named and all started with the letter 'C'.



The map clearly illustrates the myriad of interweaving trenches needed to support the frontline trenches. The frontline can be seen on the right of the map, where protagonists faced each other across a narrow no-man's-land. Allied trenches in blue and German trenches in red. This map shows the trench system to the north-east of Arras, which can just be seen appearing in the bottom left corner, with Gavrelle at the top of the map and Plovain bottom right. To give some idea of scale, the centre of Arras was about 4 miles from the front line in July 1917.

The four communications trenches were allocated on a Company basis. 'A' company got Civil, 'B' Caledonian, 'C' Cable and 'D' Camel. All four were within artillery range of the enemy and since the communications trenches were targeted such pioneering duties were far from safe and exploding shells were commonplace. It is unknown which trench Sergeant John Baker was working on but history tells us that he became a victim of enemy fire on the very first night of the battalions pioneering activities. They first went out on the night of the 12th/13th July. Letters received by his family back in Kington illuminate what happened. Sergeant Baker had been sent on an errand by his Company officer, when he returned he discovered that his platoon had already left for their allocated trench. In an effort to catch up and overtake his men he moved into open ground. At some point, in pitch darkness, an enemy shell landed close to Sergeant Baker, who was hit in the head by shrapnel and knocked unconscious. Once this tragedy was discovered he was immediately taken to the nearest Dressing Station and from there to No.8 Casualty Clearing Station, located at Duisans. Letters from the front inform of his injuries which were such that he never regained consciousness and died that afternoon, **13th July 1917**. It is very evident from the letters received by his parents that John was a highly regarded member of the team. His Adjutant wrote, *'A good soldier is generally a good son, so I know you will find his loss hard to bear, but it will be something to feel that he was a fine soldier and died a soldiers' death without suffering'*. His Company Officer, Captain Tanner, wrote, *'his excellence as a soldier was proved by his rapid promotion and I sympathise with you all very much in your loss'*. Captain Tanner visited his grave shortly after John's burial and gave instructions as to the erection of a cross. But perhaps the most poignant letter was from his friend Sergeant Crawley who wrote;

'It was an agreement between us that if anything happened to either we would write and let the folk at home know. No one will miss his company more than myself'.

The camaraderie and fatalism of such words are testimony to the bond between warriors. Fighting men can easily be perceived as hard, unfeeling people, but Sergeant Crawley showed a softer side to his nature when he informed John's parents that their son *'now lies at rest in a quiet, little cemetery'*. That quiet, little



Duisans British Cemetery 1917-1920

cemetery is Duisans British Cemetery on the outskirts of Etrun, where he lies in plot IV.O.32.

In July 1917 No8 Casualty Clearing Station (CCS) was located outside the village of Agnez-les-Duisans, which lies about three miles west of Arras. As was inevitable, attached to the CCS was a cemetery, this one later being named Duisans British Cemetery.

The area around Duisans was occupied by Commonwealth forces from March 1916, but it was not until February 1917 that the site of this cemetery was selected by the 8th Casualty Clearing Station, burial officer. Most of the graves relate to the Battles of Arras in 1917, and the unremitting trench warfare that followed. Duisans continued to be a location for subsequent Casualty Clearing Stations until 1920 with the cemetery in continuous use. John is now in the company of 3206 of his comrades from WW1 and incidentally, 88 German burials. Death does not differentiate between nationalities.

The appalling death of their son John must have affected his parents immensely. The 25th May 1918 edition of the Kington Times sadly records the demise of John Baker, accountant to Messrs. James Meredith and Co. Ironmongers. Highly regarded in Kington, John senior had worked for the Meredith family for 44 years and continued to do so until the week before his death at the age of 68. Reverend Hawes took the service at the Baptist Church in Bridge Street at which John had been a longstanding member of the congregation. Poor Mary had lost a son and husband within a year of each other and her loss must have been unbearable. On the 9th January 1918 Sergeant John Baker's effects and outstanding account was made up, whereupon £3 12s 6d was forwarded to his brother Alfred. The following year on 24th November a further £8 10s war gratuity was again passed to Alfred. Mary struggled on and survived her husband and son until 1936 when she passed away in Kington at the ripe old age of 86.



John is proudly remembered on Kington's War Memorial and at his grave site in Duisans. But he is also remembered at the Queen's Own (Royal West Kent Regiment) Cenotaph in Brenchley Gardens, Maidstone. This magnificent memorial, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, is a two-thirds scale replica of Lutyens cenotaph on Whitehall and was consecrated on the 30th July 1921 just a couple of months after Kington memorial was dedicated. John may not have been in harm's way very long but this highly regarded, capable man was sorely missed by all who knew him. For his service to king and country he was awarded the Victory and British War medals. May he long rest in peace.



Researched and developed by Mark Wheatland