

Llewellyn John Griffiths

Private

20935

6th Battalion, King's Shropshire Light Infantry



James Griffiths

Llewellyn John Griffiths was the only son of James and Jane Griffiths. James, a Joiner originally from Old Radnor, married a Llanbister lass, Jane Bufton, on the 20th October 1882. Their first child Gwenneth arrived a couple of years later in 1885. In 1890 they were blessed with a second daughter Harriet and in 1894,



Jane Bufton

Llewellyn John Griffiths, the focus of this biography, was born in Llantrisant, South Wales. Llewellyn was followed in 1898 by Mary Eleanor who was to be James and Janes last child.

In childhood James had lived in Walton Green, Womaston but by 1891 had moved his young family to 34 London Street, Mountain Ash in the Rhondda Valley. Undoubtably he had moved south looking for work and indeed he was employed as a Joiner, whether in the mines or not is unclear. In the 1901 census we find that James had moved his family back to Kington. They were now living at 5 Wislades Row and James was employed as a Joiner for Deacons the builders. Llewellyn was a scholar at Kington Boys School but by the 2nd April 1911, the date of that years census, he had left school and at the age of seventeen was working as a Baker. From other contemporary documents we know that Llewellyn went on to be a Postman in Kington and it was from this employment that he enlisted into the Army.

As is often the case, Llewellyn's service records do not survive, having been destroyed in a WW2 bombing raid. However, from those documents which do exist we know in September 1915 he enlisted in Shrewsbury into the Shropshire Yeomanry as Private 2692 Griffiths. By definition Yeomanry were mounted soldiers/cavalry and at the outbreak of war it was expected that mounted troops would be required as they had been in many conflicts previously. But as the war ground on and trench warfare on the Western Front became the order of the day the necessity and effectiveness of mounted units came into question. The 1/1st Shropshire Yeomanry became dismounted in November 1915 and merged with the 1/1st Cheshire Yeomanry in March 1917 becoming the 10th (Shropshire & Cheshire Yeomanry) Battalion, the King's Shropshire Light Infantry.

Llewellyn's obituary in the Kington Times, 13th October 1917 edition, sheds light on his early years in the army. Not only were British soldiers fighting on the Western Front but they were also quelling a republican rebellion in Ireland. The obituary reveals that one of his first postings was in Ireland during the uprising. Following this posting he was transferred into the 6th Battalion, Kings Shropshire Light Infantry (K.S.L.I.), still as a Private, and his service number was changed to 20935. As a member of the 6th battalion Llewellyn first entered France in December 1916. Men from all over the Marches served with the K.S.L.I. and in particular we know that Llewellyn served in the 6th battalion with a fellow Kingtonian, Edward Pinches. Edward was sadly killed in action at the Battle of Menin Road Ridge on the 27th September 1917. It is highly likely the two met and may have even served in the same Company. Llewellyn and Edward would have shared many experiences, some good, some awful.

The 6th (Service) Battalion had been formed in December 1914 from villages and towns around the County. Recruits volunteered so rapidly that a problem was encountered with the supply of uniforms and equipment and the men of the 6th had to wait until the November before they received their first issue of emergency blue uniform. Few rifles were available so the men first paraded with a mixture of uniforms and mufti, bowler and straw hats, poles, stakes and pit-props. In July 1915, the battalion had moved to Larkhill on Salisbury Plain and became a unit of the 60th Infantry Brigade, 20th Division. On 21st July they entrained for Folkstone and after a rough crossing aboard a 'small Channel boat' at 12:50am on the 22nd July 1915 disembarked at Boulogne. Their first camp was at Ousterhove Rest Camp on the outskirts of Boulogne. From here they were quickly moved up the coast to Calais and then on to St Omer, a few miles inland and near the Belgian border. On the 30th of July, the battalion were moved still closer to the front and were inspected by General Sir Douglas Haig. Muster passed, on the 11th of August 1915 they entered the trenches by Companies, initially for training purposes by seasoned campaigners but by the end of the month they managed their own trenches near Laventie right on the French/Belgian border.

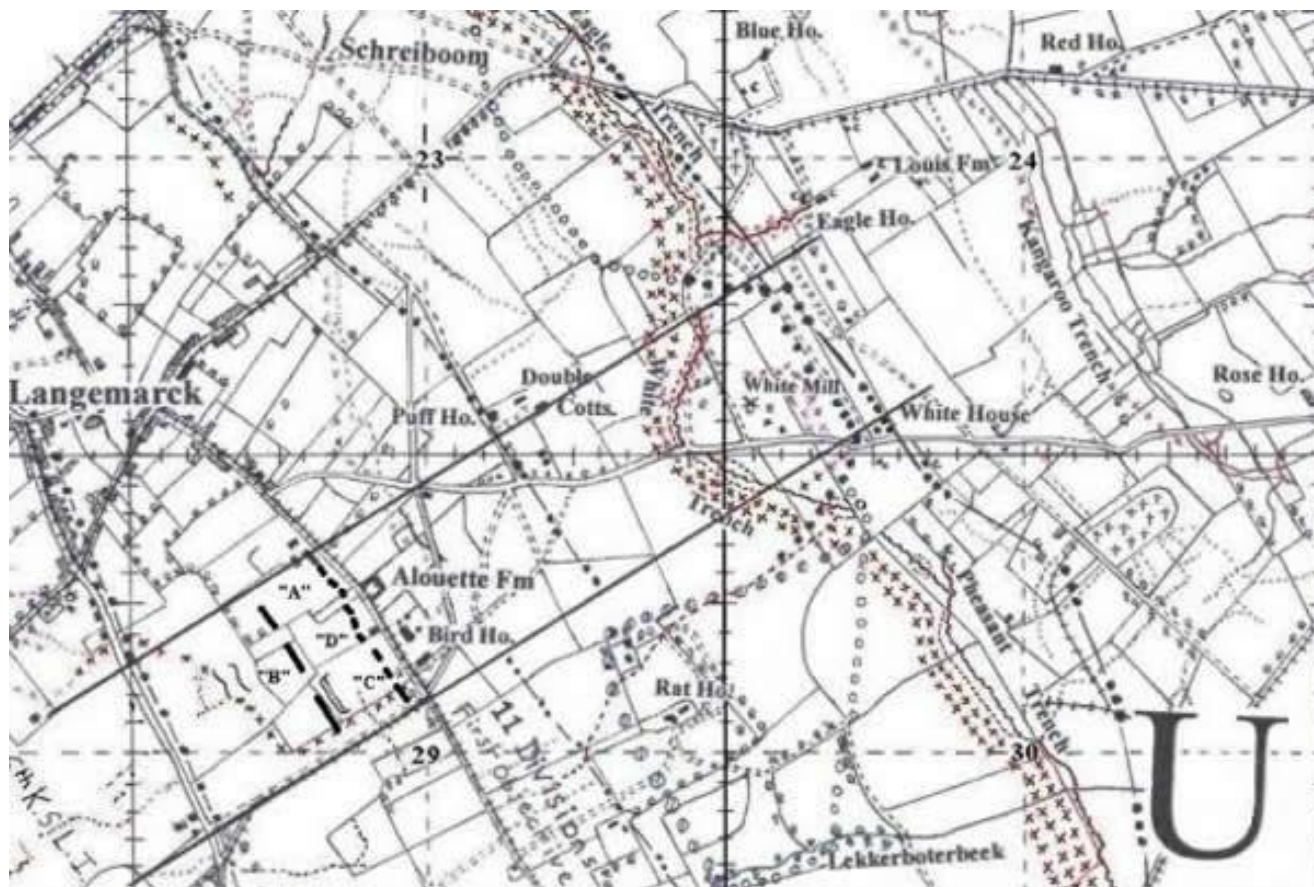
There followed a succession of engagements some small, some major. In September 1915, the battalion were involved at the Battle of Loos and in June

1916 The Battle of Sorrel where they came under attack from lachrymatory shells, today known as tear gas. In early September 1916 they saw action at the Battle of Guillemont and a month later at the Battle of the Transloy Ridges. Toward the end of 1916 the battalion were removed from the frontlines and given the opportunity for rest, relaxation and the time to regroup. We know that Llewellyn joined his comrades in December 1916 and would have been one of many fresh recruits sent to swell the depleted numbers of the battalion. Christmas 1916 was spent out of the lines and Ville-sur-Ancre where a good time was had by all. In early 1917 and following the gruelling Battle of the Somme, strategically the Germans had only one option open to them, retreat. Their aim was to retreat behind the newly constructed and heavily fortified Hindenburg line which ran from Arras to Laffaux, near Soissons on the Aisne. The 6th K.S.L.I. were more than happy to help them on their way. Llewellyn and his battalion fought on through 1917 and in the August of that year played a major role in the Battle of Langemarck, an offensive designed to eject German forces from this strategically important town which lay to the north east of Ypres. The Kingston Times informs us that it was during this engagement, on 17th August, that Llewellyn received his first injuries.

Llewellyn's story now moves on to September 1917 and the Battle of Menin Road Ridge. In the east Russia was faring badly against the Germans and this threatened to release German troops back to the Western Front. The French achieved success at Verdun but their morale was low and resistance exhausted. Sir Douglas Haig was adamant that offensives on the Ypres salient, despite their slow progress and the unseasonable weather in August, were essential in occupying the Germans and thus relieving pressure on the Russians and French. The Battle of Menin Road Ridge was one such offensive.

This encounter was the third general battle of the third Battle of Ypres and took place between the 20th and 25th of September 1917. As the war progressed so British tactics had evolved and at this battle a system of "leap frogging" was used whereby units were set achievable objectives which they would consolidate while fresher units would leap frog them and move on to new objectives. This tactic was successfully used by the 6th K.S.L.I. but in terrible conditions and under very strong resistance by the enemy. Prior to the attack extensive aerial reconnaissance was undertaken along with field observations to better understand the field of battle. The contemporary map included below, shows the area of responsibility the 6th K.S.L.I. had during the advance on 20th September. Significant structures and key trenches are clearly identified. By consulting the battalions official war diary for the period 19th – 23rd September and in conjunction with the map, the battalions and Llewellyn's involvement in this epic battle is revealed.

In the advance the 6th K.S.L.I. were supporting the 12th Rifle Brigade and 6th Ox and Bucks Light Infantry who were to be in the vanguard of the advance. The battalion formed up on the 19th September at Alouette Farm, just to the south east of Langemarck. At 5:40am on the 20th the battalion started their advance



with A and D Companies following the Ox and Bucks LI and Rifle Brigade respectively. It was for A and D Companies to consolidate the ground taken by the Ox and Bucks and Rifle Brigade in a line from White Mill (Windmill) to Cemetery. At all times, it was important that A and D Companies kept in communication with the advancing battalions and to respond to their needs as required. B and C Companies stayed in their assembly point at Alouette Farm until called upon. D Company advanced across open ground until they reached White Trench all the while under enemy crossfire from Eagle Trench. D company were brought up to fill gaps which had occurred during the initial advance and once a protective barrage had been organised advanced still further to White Mill. Meanwhile A Company had dug in in White Trench, all the while under heavy machine gun fire from Eagle Trench. A Company casualties were high and their isolated position on the left of the front made communication with them particularly challenging. B and C Companies advanced in support and came under heavy shell activity from the enemy. To avoid the murderous shellfire they advanced at pace some 100yds beyond the bombardment and as the morning wore on the battalion consolidated their new positions. At 2pm the 6th K.S.L.I. were ordered to attack what they knew as the Green Line and later, in conjunction with the 12th Kings Royal Rifle Corps, were again ordered to advance this time to a line running between and through, White House, Louis Farm, Cemetery and Eagle Trench. At 5:45 the commander of D Company reported that a counter attack was underway and that enemy infantry could clearly be seen advancing in open order onto Kangaroo Trench. Such was the aggression of this counter attack that allied troops on the right were seen

retiring from Kangaroo Trench. At 6:30 a barrage was laid down which enabled British troops to regroup and then advance once more. By sticking close to the barrage D Company were able to advance into Eagle Trench and also attacked Louis Farm. The diary proudly informs us that Corporal S. Williams and fifteen men took Louis Farm and in spite of stiff resistance he and his team advanced beyond the farm to consolidate their gains. Resistance in Eagle Trench was extreme and only when a Lewis Gun was brought forward was order resumed. I need not articulate what terrible havoc was wreaked. The attackers entered the trench and cleared it of enemy all the way through to Cemetery. Meanwhile over on the right C Company advanced into ground to the south of Louis Farm and joined up with troops from the 51st Division thus securing all ground from Eagle Trench through to Kangaroo Trench. That night all ground gained was consolidated and the enemy failed to counter-attack. On the 21st an enemy patrol bombed the front line to the south of Louis Farm but were repelled by men of C Company who emerged from their trench, killed the patrol officer and took eight German Stormtroopers prisoner. Later that day the battalion were relieved and retired back into a support roll. One officer and twenty-five men were left to hold the cemetery flank. On the 23rd the battalion were relieved by the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry.

During four days of intense fighting the battalion acquitted itself with great honour. Taking and holding the strategically vital Eagle Trench was the pinnacle of their achievement. The 20th Division had performed well and all objectives were achieved, this leading the Army Commander, General Sir Hubert Gough to release the following communique.

'The tenacity, gallantry and skill which the Division showed over the operations round Eagle Trench are very fine. Please accept my congratulations and expressions of admiration for you and all ranks of your gallant Division'.

Wounded men on the roadside following the Battle of Menin Road Ridge



In recognition of their bravery in fighting between the 19th and 23rd September 1917, sixteen NCO's and other ranks of the 6th K.S.L.I. were awarded the Military Medal. However, such glory and achievement came at the loss and injury of many good men. Total British casualties between 20-25th September were 20,255 of which 3148 were killed. German casualties broached 25,000 with some 3243 taken prisoner during the conflict.

The battle was considered a success for the British but as can be seen, losses were considerable. The Kington Times reports that Llewellyn was seriously injured on the 20th September in the initial advance toward the enemy. He sustained a serious

gunshot wound to the head and was initially evacuated to a Casualty Clearing Station behind the battle lines. The severity of his injuries meant he was swiftly evacuated still further to one of the many Field Hospitals located on the French coast. He was then shipped across the Channel and repatriated onto British soil.

Such was the sheer number of casualties returning from the Western Front that existing military hospitals could not cope. The authorities were forced to act and many general hospitals, asylums and even large private homes were commandeered by the military to deal with the unprecedented number of casualties. One such establishment was the South Yorkshire Asylum (Middlewood) at Wadsley on the outskirts of Sheffield. In the spring of 1915 the asylum was handed over to the War Office with its name changed to Wharncliffe War Hospital. Hasty alterations and adaptations were made with three operating theatres and an x-ray department being established. Dayrooms and even corridors were turned over to beds and were used as wards. Ultimately the hospital could treat over 2000 inmates at any one time. 37,000 patients pass through the hospital during the war, over 200 did not survive their injuries. Llewellyn was sent to Wharncliffe War Hospital but so serious were his injuries that his condition was considered hopeless. The army contacted his parents in Kington and prepared them for the worse. Llewellyn was one of the 200 who did not survive, succumbing to his injuries on the **2nd October 1917**, he was just 23 years of age.

Wharncliffe War Hospital



Llewellyn's body was returned to Kington arriving on Thursday 11th October. He was buried in Kington Cemetery on Saturday 13th October, with full military honours, his coffin draped in the Union Jack. The Kington Times provides an excellent report on the funeral, listing all the people who attended, from family and friends, brothers in arms and many Kington mourners. Llewellyn was officially



single at the time of his death but one of the attendees was a Miss Buckley, his fiancée. The service closed with buglers from the Depot of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry sounding 'The Last Post' over his grave. This superb memorial stone to Llewellyn and members of his family can be found in Kington Cemetery, plot number 2207.

The Battle of Menin Road Ridge had taken the lives of two Kington men. For his bravery and sacrifice on the battlefield Llewellyn was awarded the Victory and British War medals. Kington remembered these brave men when on the 6th July 1919 a Peace Service was held at St. Marys Church. Llewellyn's name was read out along with

sixty of his comrades. James, Llewellyn's father, died in Kington at the age 75 in 1934 and his mother Jane survived until 1945 when she passed away at the grand old age of 87. Such was their loss that when James and Jane died they were both 'reunited' with their son in Kington Cemetery.

For me, tragic as this story is, the saddest part has been the engagement between Llewellyn and Miss Buckley. They had so much to look forward to but their future together was curtailed by the cruel events that happened on 20th September 1917. Sadly this scenario would have been played out all over Britain.

'Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends'

