

# Harry Lewis

Private

1154

1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers



Samuel Lewis, a Kington man, married Mary Jane Parton in 1888. Shortly after they started a family and Harry was to be the first of many children. A sister Ethel was also born in Kington before the small family moved to South Wales and lived with Mary's brother William at 8 Trelaw Road, Home Penrhys, Ystradyfodwg in Glamorganshire.



Lewis Family c1904

Daisy  
Gladys

Samuel  
Leslie

Harry  
Rose

Mary Jane

Ethel  
Herbert

Thomas

Here the family continued to grow with the birth of a second sister Rose Maud. By 1901 the family were living back in Kington at 20 Mill Street and had grown by the addition of four other children, Thomas(1893), Winifred Daisy(1895), Gladys(1898) and Herbert(1899). Samuel is recorded as a Pit Sawyer and 13 year old Harry was working as a Butchers errand boy. Prior to this he had been educated at Kington Boys School on Gravel Hill. The photograph above,

taken in about 1904, shows another little boy Leslie who arrived in late 1901. One face missing from this photograph is the baby of the family, Cecil, who was born in the December of 1905. More about Cecil later. With the family growing we discover that Harry moved away from Kington and found work as a coal miner. It's not clear where but it is highly likely, he moved back to the South Wales coal fields. This line of

employment was perhaps not to Harry's liking and at some point prior to the outbreak of war, about 1910, he enlisted into 1st Battalion the Northumberland Fusiliers in Brecon. At the time of the 1911 census Private Harry Lewis, service number 1154, is billeted at a seaside army establishment in Fleetwood, Fylde, Lancashire. Harry's life was to change forever when on the 4th of August 1914 war was declared with Germany. At 6pm on the 4th August the 1st Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers were mobilized and as a regular Harry was to be one of the first into the fray.

At the outbreak of war the battalion formed part of 9th Brigade, 3rd Division and were billeted in Cambridge Barracks, Portsmouth. On the 13th the whole battalion boarded trains bound for Southampton where they immediately embarked aboard the SS Norman and at 4pm sailed for an unknown destination. An hour after sailing the men were told that they were heading for Le Havre. After a short trip across the Channel the ship arrived at its destination and the men were disembarked at 5am on the 14th August. Then began a long march across France toward the French/Belgian border. They marched until the 22nd of August when they reached a place called Blaregneis on the border. As soon as they arrived two companies were detached and sent to take up position on the Mons-Conde Canal to the north of the Battalion HQ at Blaregneis. The canal was the point chosen where the French, British and Belgian troops were to halt the German aggressor's advance. The Battle of Mons opened at dawn on 23rd of August with a German artillery bombardment of the British lines. The attempt to halt and hold the German advance failed and the Allied forces were compelled to retreat. It was at this place and at this time that The First World War started in earnest.

Throughout the first month of the war the allies were pressured by German forces and were forced to continue their retreat. Organisation between the allies was poor and this enabled the enemy to prosper and take advantage. The rout was halted at the Battle of Marne between the 5th and 22nd of September, when allied forces halted the German advance on the outskirts of Paris. During this period the battalion and in particular Harry's 'Y' Company, were heavily involved in the fighting as they helped repel the enemy and turned them away from Paris. The Germans were forced back all the way to the River Aisne, a wide deep river which acted as a natural buffer between the two forces. With the German advance halted British troops were moved from the Aisne, across France, toward what later became known as the Western Front. On the 6th of October the battalion entrained to Abberville where they arrived on the 7th. From here they were bussed and marched, toward the front lines at Sachin, arriving on the 9th October. Most of October was spent marching from village to village following the action. On the 15th October they were involved in a successful attack on German trenches, overrunning the trenches and ejecting the enemy. On the 26th the battalion arrived at Neuve Chapelle to the south of the large town of Estaires. What follows is an account, taken from the battalion war diary, of what happened to the Northumberland Fusiliers between the 26th and 29th of October.

The battalion left their billets at 1:30am on the 26th and started relieving the Lincolnshire Regiment in the trenches to the south and in front of Neuve Chapelle. They were in position by 5:25am. A lone sniper kept taking pot-shots at them but otherwise all was fairly quiet. That was until 3pm when enemy heavy artillery opened up on the

battalion's forward and reserve trenches. This was followed at 3:30pm by an enemy infantry attack. By 4:20pm the enemy had started occupying the Northumberland's trenches, particularly on their right flank. The officer recording events stated that the 'Germans showed great enterprise in charging the trenches and occupying the communication trenches as well'. Two platoons of W company, who were in battalion reserve, were sent forward to reinforce Z Company. In addition, half the battalion reserve of the Royal Fusiliers were sent to assist. The communications trench was recaptured and at 7pm a large British reinforcement from troop reserves came to assist and, in an attempt to wrestle Neuve Chapelle from the enemy, engaged in a full frontal attack on the small town. During the night the enemy again attacked the right in strength but were driven off. At this time the position was that the British line was not broken but bowed back in a half circle around Neuve Chapelle. During the night Y Company relieved Z Company, who went into reserve and another Company was detached and sent behind the trenches to make communications with the Royal Fusiliers on the right. In the early morning darkness of the 27<sup>th</sup>, the enemy entrenched in front of the Northumberland's right hand trenches at a distance of about 150yds. After a heavy bombardment of Neuve Chapelle, British forces attacked in force in order to regain lost trenches. This attack was unsuccessful, but the Lincolnshire Regiment did succeed in coming between the 1st Northumberland's and the Royal Fusiliers, thus reinforcing the line. Fighting was so intense that the Northumberland's HQ was moved 500 yards to the rear. The battalion continued their desperate defence for a further two days until they were relieved during the afternoon of the 29<sup>th</sup>. The war diary records that during the desperate four day defence the battalion lost 6 officers dead and one wounded with 35 other ranks dead and 54 wounded. Unusually there is a very comprehensive list of names of those killed and wounded in the Northumberland regimental diaries. Harry was one of those killed in action on the **27th of October 1914**, he was 27 years old, making him one of the first Kington men to be killed.

From the 13th October until the end of the month the losses for 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion the Northumberland Fusiliers were colossal. 80 men were killed and 235 wounded, 44 were recorded as missing. Harry's death is commemorated at Le Touret Memorial, on the road between Bethune and Neuve Chapelle, panels 5 and 6. The memorial commemorates over 13,400 British soldiers who were killed in this sector of the Western Front from the beginning of October 1914 to the eve of the Battle of Loos in late September 1915, and who have no known grave. Almost all the men commemorated served with regular or territorial regiments from across the United Kingdom and were killed in actions that took place along a section of the front line that stretched from Estaires in the north to Grenay in the south. This part of the Western Front saw some of the heaviest fighting of the first year of the war. Harry was awarded the 1914 Star,



Victory and British War medals. He was also awarded a Clasp for the 1914 Star, known as the Mons Bar. This very special bar was only awarded to those who served under fire in France between 5th August and 22nd November 1914. Harry was one of those brave men.

Earlier I mentioned Cecil Lewis, youngest brother of Harry. In 1932 Cecil married Rosa Nash and the following year their first child, Gerald, was born, to be followed in 1938 by Cecily and 1943 by Anthony. On the left is a photograph of Cecil and below another beautiful photograph of Cecil and Harry's parents, Samuel and Mary, in later life. Samuel passed away in 1934 and Mary followed him in 1956. And finally, much of the information and all the photographs in this biography have been provided by Gerald Lewis, Harry's nephew. My sincere thanks and gratitude go to Gerald and the whole Lewis family for their kind help in enabling me to compile this poignant memorial to Harry Lewis, a hero of World War One.



Cecil Lewis youngest brother of Harry Lewis and father of Gerald Lewis



Samuel Lewis and Mary Jane Lewis (nee Parton) c1930

N.B.

In July 2015, staff from Lady Hawkins' School organised an educational trip to the battlefields of Flanders for students from the school. On the 16<sup>th</sup> July Harry Lewis's great, great nephew, Will Eggerton, laid a wreath at Le Touret Memorial, beneath the point where Harry Lewis is remembered. A brief and respectful ceremony was undertaken by the students during which a quiet period of reflection was allowed for Will and those present to remember the sacrifice Harry Lewis made for his country.



Will Eggerton at the memorial to Harry Lewis, 16th July 2015



Mons Star Trio

Researched and produced by Mark Wheatland