

John Edwin Williams

Private

8188

1st Battalion, King's Shropshire Light Infantry

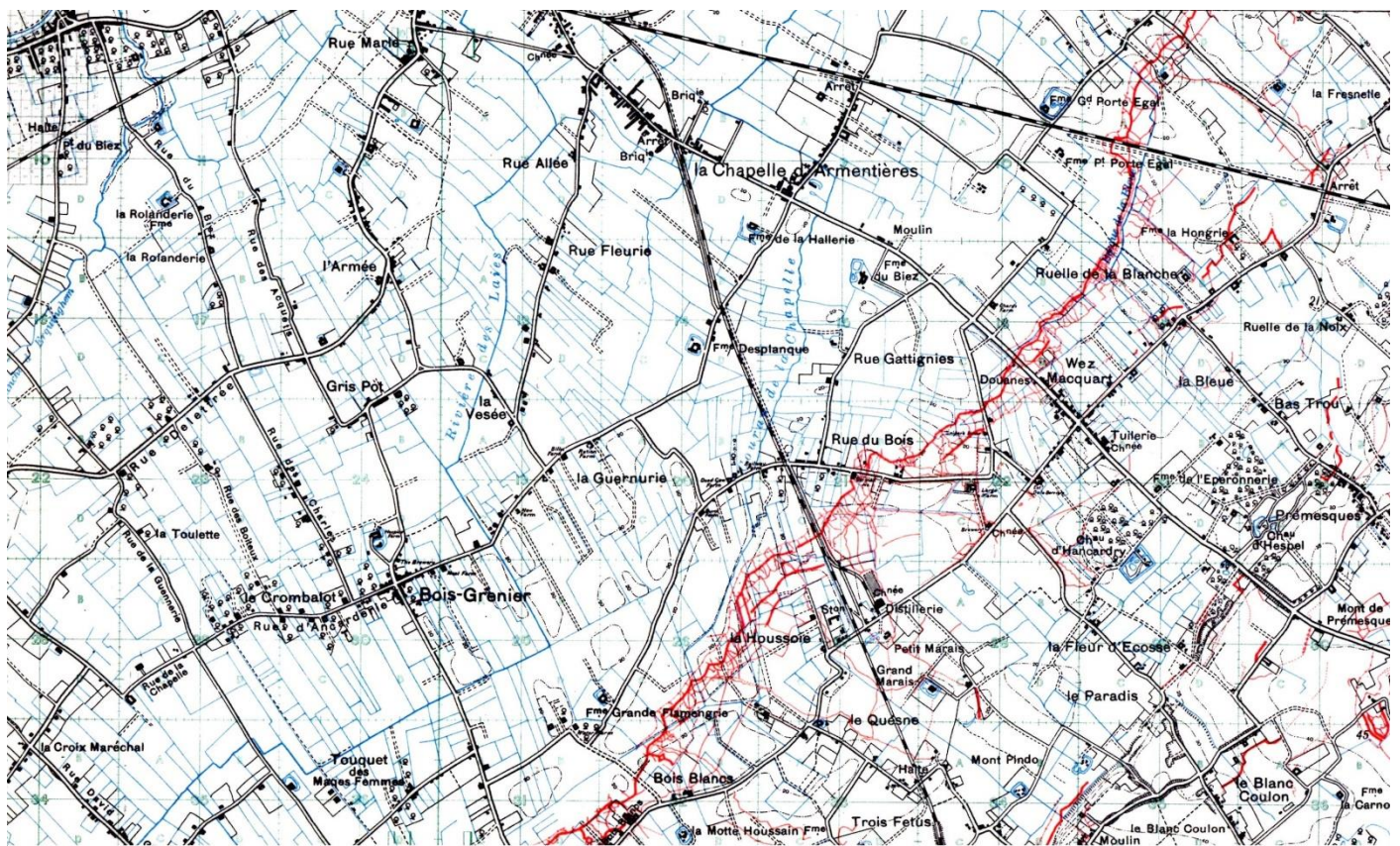


John Edwin Williams was born in Kington in 1884. His mother was a lady called Ann Williams who had been born in 1865 in Lyonshall. Some confusion exists about her marital status but it appears that at some point around 1884 she married a gentleman rather conveniently called Williams. John arrived in 1884 and was swiftly followed by seven other siblings. Ann also appears to have taken in waifs and strays since in the 1901 census she also has two young children who are recorded with the annotation 'nurse child'. This infers the two children needed caring for because their parents were unable to cope or just not capable. The closest we have today would be a Foster Carer. Little is known of John's early life in Kington, other than he attended Kington Boys School. But by the 1901 census John is found living with his uncle at 17 Henry Street, Hopkinstown a village outside Pontypridd. This household appears to be a veritable Smorgesbourg of family relatives. John's uncle, John Williams is the head of the household and he is joined by his mother, John junior's grandmother Ann Mathews, another uncle, an aunt and finally a cousin. At this time our John is seventeen and is recorded as being a coal miner. It is unknown when John's father passed away but we know that in 1906 Ann Williams, John's mother, married Lemuel Isett, a Pontypridd coal miner. On her marriage certificate it states that she is a widow. Nothing is known of John's father.

We can assume that the draw of the army was great and that John had a desire to escape the pits. We do not know when but by the time of the 1911 census he had enlisted at Pontypridd as Private 8188 Williams into the Kings Shropshire Light Infantry, 2nd Battalion and was based at Secunderabad in India. The record shows that at the start of the war on the 4th of August 1914, John had been transferred into the 1st Battalion the King's Shropshire Light Infantry and was based in Tipperary, Ireland.

By the 20th August 1914 the battalion had been moved across the Irish Sea and were back on mainland Britain based in Cambridge. On the 8th September they embarked at Southampton and landed on French soil

at St. Nazaire on the evening of the 10th September. They were immediately sent to the front which at that time was located just outside Paris. Following a month long offensive by the Germans, more commonly known as the retreat from Mons, French and British armies succeeded in halting the enemy advance on the 11th of September at the Marne River which runs to the east of Paris. This was to be the furthest west the German army progressed and what followed was the allied counter attack. The battalion were involved in the push back and long march east to the Aisne River. At 10pm on the 21st September the battalion crossed the river on pontoons and the following day two Companies of the 1st KSLI moved into trenches just outside the town of Vailly. The other two Companies were kept in reserve but the whole battalion remained in the Vailly area until the 1st October when they were relieved by the 3rd Coldstream Guards. They might well have thought they had earned themselves a rest but it was not to be. The battalion were immediately moved to the opposite side of Vailly and relieved the Royal Scots Fusiliers, and there they stayed until the 12th October when they were relieved in their turn by the 287th Regiment of French Infantry. Following this relief they were marched back across the Aisne and boarded a train at Fismes on the 13th October. The battalion was entrained north arriving at Cassel, a French Flemish border town, on the 14th. Here they were to take part in what has now become known as the 1st Battle of Ypres. British units had succeeded in taking the militarily significant town of Armentieres on the 17th October, which was then stoically defended until 2nd November. On the evening of the 19th/20th October the war diary records that 1st KSLI were involved in fighting outside the small village of Bois Grenier just south of Armentieres. On the morning of the 20th the Germans mounted an assault on British lines and the 1st Kings Shropshire Light Infantry were in the forefront of fighting. By the evening of the 20th the battalion found themselves in a defensive position at Le Quesne farm.



1915 Trench Map showing Le Quesne Farm at bottom, centre and Bois Grenier to the north west of the farm

Heavy shelling was endured by the battalion on the 23rd October with little reply from British artillery. At 4.30am on the 23rd the enemy attacked in force. The KSLI took the full brunt of this attack but repelled the enemy with staunch resistance. The Germans repeatedly attacked the battalion but they held firm repelling

all assaults. That evening a last vain attempt was made to force a way past the 1st Battalion but again they held the line and would not allow the enemy to pass. The war diary records that over 200 enemy dead were piled up in front of the battalion trenches by the end of the 23rd. The following evening they were again attacked in force but with the same result, no progress was made. By now the German trenches were no more than 50 metres from the 1st Battalion's trenches. At nightfall on the 25th they were ordered to withdraw, in order, back to Bois Grenier. Through the night they retired and the next morning arrived at the little village of Bois Grenier having maintained their formation all the way, the diary records that this was due to the indomitable courage of all ranks. Casualties for the five days of fighting amounted to 3 officers killed and 8 wounded, 52 other ranks killed with 71 wounded and 11 missing.

About this time a myth developed which suggested Kaiser Wilhelm, enraged by the stubborn allied defence, had issued the following order to his Generals, "It is my Royal and Imperial Command that you concentrate your energies, for the immediate present, upon one single purpose and that is that you address all your skill and all the valour of my soldiers, to exterminate first the treacherous English and then walk over General French's contemptible little Army." The order was recorded in an annexe to B.E.F. Routine Orders of September 24th, 1914. The authenticity of the order was always disputed and an official investigation in 1925 found that the Kaiser never actually said these words but that the words were actually fabricated by an

unknown British officer. The word 'contemptible' had the desired effect and worked as an immensely effective patriotic rallying call for the British recruitment drive. The Old Contemptibles Association was formed in 1925 by Captain JP Danny, Royal Artillery. To be an Old Contemptible the man must have served in France and Flanders between August and November 1914.

John Williams never survived to be an Old Contemptible; he died on 23rd October 1914, very likely at Le Quesne Farm just south of Armentieres. He is remembered at the Ploegsteert Memorial which is located



Ploegsteert Memorial, Belgium

between the towns of Mesen and Ploegsteert just on the Belgian French border. The memorial commemorates some 11000 servicemen who died and have no known grave. John's loss was deeply felt by his family and for his short but fatal service in WW1 he was awarded the 1914 Star, Victory and British War medals.

John's mother, Annie Isset continued to live happily with her new husband, Lemuel, in their family home at No.2 Britannia Street, Porth, also in the Rhondda Valley. She lived at the same house for nearly fifty years and it was there that she passed away on the 3rd November 1958 at the ripe old age of 93.