

Thomas James Lowe

Private

25659

17th Battalion, The Welsh Regiment

1st Glamorgan Bantams



In many ways the early years of Thomas James Lowe were similar to his older brother Elijah, who was also killed during the war. Thomas had grown up in a family for which tragedy was always just around the corner. Robert, Thomas's father, was born in Kington in 1875 and had moved to South Wales looking for work. He became a 'hewer' in the mines, literally hewing or cutting coal from the coal face. He married Edith Hill in 1895 and shortly after Elijah was born. The following year saw the arrival of Beatrice and in 1897 Thomas James was born in Treharris on the outskirts of Merthyr Tydfil. Later, in 1900, a younger brother, Herbert, was born. In the 1901 census the family were living at 20 Mary Street, Merthyr Tydfil and it is interesting to note that Richards's two younger sisters were also living with them, making for a very crowded environment. In 1903 George Lowe was born in Abertillery, so it is quite possible the family had moved shortly after the 1901 census had been completed.

George was to be the last child of Richard and Edith's, since the first of many tragedies struck the Lowe family in 1906. Edith had sadly died, leaving Richard to bring up his five children alone, while still working in the mines. However, as is often the case, Richard did find happiness again, with a Francis Ellen Compton. Frances and Richard had much in common. They had both suffered heartache, with

the loss of their partners, and both were left to bring up their young families alone. As Francis Ellen Jenkins she had married George Compton in 1894 and together they had two children, Agnes and George. Tragically George Compton senior died in 1896. Francis struggled on for twelve years until she met Richard and on the 20th April 1908, in Kington, they re-married. At the time of the 1911 census, taken on the 2nd April, the now combined family were living at 3 Bute Place, Cwmnanty Gynt, Aberbeeg in Monmouthshire and Francis had given Richard a sixth child called Richard Albert, born in Abertillery in 1910. But they didn't stop there, Richard junior was swiftly followed nine months later, by Francis Eliza Anne Lowe. This does appear to be the end of the family's growth. No.3 Bute Place was not a large house and living all under the same roof were Richard, Francis and their nine children. By 1911 both Elijah, his brother Thomas and step-brother George Compton were all working down the mines and like their father were all employed as Hewer's. Thomas was just short of his 14th birthday and George was barely 14.

Working in the mines was a hard occupation and the excitement and draw of the military must have seemed irresistible and inevitably we learn that Elijah Lowe joined the Royal Welsh Fusiliers (RWF), before the start of war. The RWF were a front line unit and so at the outbreak of war he was one of the first into the fray. Elijah's war was not long and sadly he was 'killed in action' on the 25th October 1915, in the trenches of the Western Front. George Compton also enlisted, joining the 8th (Service) Battalion (Pioneers) The Welsh Regiment. We know little of his exploits other than the battalion were at Gallipoli and a report in the Kington Times informs us George was wounded in the ankle during heavy fighting on 8th August. He was evacuated from Gallipoli to the Naval Hospital in Malta from where he wrote his mother a letter informing her of his injuries.

If we now return to Thomas James Lowe, the focus of this piece, we will discover more about his fate. We do not know exactly when Thomas enlisted into the 17th Welsh Regiment but we do know it was in Caerphilly and by investigating the battalion war diary we are able to shed some light on Thomas's involvement and his demise. The 17th (Service Battalion) The Welsh Regiment, were known as the First Glamorgan Bantams. Bantam Battalions were so called because of the small stature and height of the recruits but this in no way affected their fighting ability. The battalion, initially raised in Cardiff in late 1914, primarily consisted of miners. They were immediately moved to Ryle in north Wales for training and were attached to the 43rd Division. In February 1915 they were moved to another training camp in north Wales, Rhos and in the July were again moved, this time to Prees Heath training camp outside the town of Whitchurch in Shropshire. Prees Heath was a purpose built camp for training in the finer arts of trench warfare. In July 1915 the battalion came under the 119th Brigade, 40th Division and were again moved, this time to Aldershot. It appears the battalion were in this area for the rest of 1915 and the first half of 1916.

The war diary informs us that in June 1916 the battalion were at Aisnes Barracks at Blackdown near Camberley. Once mobilised we discover that on the 2nd June

they entrained at Frimley and detrained at Southampton, where they boarded the SS City of Benares and arrived in Le Havre the following day. They were then put aboard trains and moved to Lillers, a small village northwest of Bethune, used as a marshalling and hospital point. From here they were on foot and marched a few miles north to St Hilaire-Cottes where they were eventually billeted. They stayed at St Hilaire until the 9th June when they started moving toward the front line and on the 10th arrived at Houchin, south of Bethune. It was here that they first entered the trenches and were given trench warfare instruction by the 2nd Battalion the Black Watch. The battalion suffered their first casualty on the 11th when 'one other rank was injured'. They then cycled in and out of the trenches, from Houchin to Maroc, until the 23rd when they were relieved and moved back to Divion. By this time the men's health was suffering and many were complaining of the itch. This was put down to the unsanitary conditions at St Hilaire and the fact they had not bathed since leaving England weeks earlier. This concern was addressed when they were marched to Auchel where they were able to take a bath, refresh and recuperate. On the 3rd of July the men were again moved forward and into the trenches at Barlin some five miles south of Bethune. As was the life of the tommy they were again moved this time to Bully Grenay, not far from Loos. Throughout the rest of July the battalion cycled in and out of the trenches. But by August they appear to have been settled in trenches near Calonne, west of Bethune. Trench warfare was incredibly dangerous and stressful. The diary informs us they were under constant fire, shelling and being bombed. On the 6th of August they were gassed but their training meant they suffered few casualties.

Trench warfare was often fought at close quarters and at Calonne the German trenches were very close to the allied trenches and each protagonist would take it in turns to go out and patrol the little strip of land between them, 'no-mans-land'. The men were constantly rebuilding and reinforcing their trenches to make them more habitable and weapon proof. Conditions were poor at Calonne but they were proud of the improvements they made to the trenches there. On the 16th they were moved again to billets at Les Brebis, having been relieved by the 40th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. Rest periods were short-lived and on the 24th they were once again moved forward and relieved the 6th Connaught Rangers at Loos. Again the trenches they inherited were in a very poor state of repair and the men set about repairing them immediately. Patrols were sent out and reported back on the poor state of our wire defences. Depressingly the German wire defences were considered in excellent condition. The men in the trenches could hear the enemy in their trenches just metre's away and on the 25th a patrol was sent out to try and capture a prisoner. Impossible, German wire defences were so good that the patrol could not get through to the enemy positions. Over the next two days the wire defences of the allied trenches were improved only to be destroyed on the 27th by enemy high explosive shells. This seems to have been the pattern here, repair trenches and defences only for them to be destroyed almost straight away. On the 28th they were relieved by the 19th Royal Welsh Fusiliers and moved to other trenches to the right of Loos. On the 29th there was a heavy storm which flooded their trenches and accommodation. Interestingly enough one of the trench systems

they were sheltering in was called Duke Street which was badly flooded. Again their work consisted of repairing trenches and improving drainage, particularly in Duke Street. I'm sure Thomas would have found the irony quite amusing.

They were again relieved by the 19th Royal Welsh Fusiliers on the 1st of September and were moved to yet another sector of trenches. The centre of their three trenches was so severely bombarded that it was made uninhabitable. The company located in those trenches was moved back to relative safety for respite. On the 2nd September the battalion were again on the receiving end of a heavy bombardment. The War Diary records that one 'other rank' was killed and one wounded. The following day they were again bombarded resulting in one 'other rank' being wounded. This punishment continued until the 6th of September when they were relieved and moved out of the trenches. Thomas James Lowe is recorded as being 'killed in action' on the **3rd of September 1916**. He may have been the chap killed on the 2nd or indeed one of the wounded on the 2nd and 3rd, succumbing to his injuries. The diary does not name 'other ranks' injured or killed.

Thomas James Lowe is buried at Philosophe British Cemetery, Marzingarbe, grave reference I.H.12. Philosophe lies between Bethune and Lens and the cemetery was started in August 1915. In 1916 it was taken over by the 16th (Irish) Division, who held the Loos Salient at the time, and many of their dead were brought back to the cemetery from the front line. Succeeding Divisions used the cemetery until October 1918, and men of the same Division, and often the same battalion, were buried side by side. After the Armistice, the cemetery was one of those used for the concentration of isolated graves from the Loos battlefield. The bodies of 41 men of the 9th Black Watch were brought from positions a little West of Loos, and those of 340 officers and men of other Regiments from different points in the communes of Cambrin, Auchy, Vermelles, Halluch and Loos. There are now 1,996 Commonwealth burials of the First World War in the cemetery, 277 of them unidentified.

Richard and Francis had now lost two of their sons and knew another lay injured in a Malta hospital. At this time Richard had moved the family back to Kington and they were living at No3 Mill Street. Events in Kington went from bad to worse and life had one further tragedy to impose upon the Lowe family. The events which follow are taken from the pages of the Kington Times and illustrate a tragic sequence of events. After the war Richard and Francis's marriage hit hard times and in September 1922 Francis appeared at Kington Petty Sessions requesting a separation from Richard. This request was granted in the following August. Richard moved out of the family home in Mill Street and rented a shed in Coopers Yard from George Graham, the bicycle agent at 21 High Street. Mr Graham reported he was happy for Richard to sleep in the shed for a short time but then required him to leave the area. Richard had reached rock bottom and the Kington Times reported in its 24th May 1924 edition that Richard Lowe, chimney sweep of Kington, had committed suicide, hanging himself in the shed rented to him by

George Graham in Coopers Yard. For the Lowe family, the war and subsequent events had been unimaginably tragic.

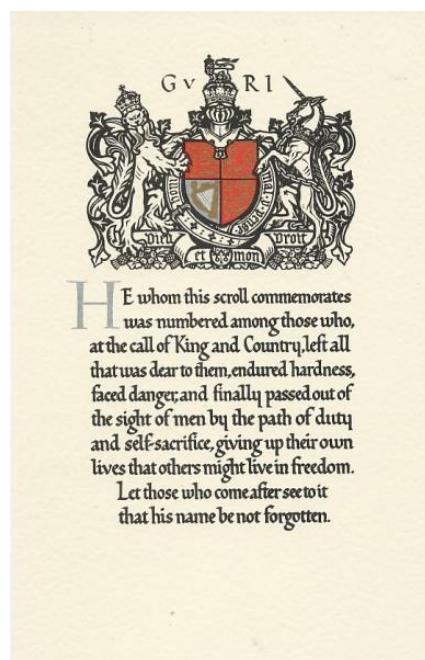
For his bravery, resolve and sacrifice Thomas James Lowe was awarded the Victory and British War Medals, below is a representation of those medals. In addition, the families of each and every man killed in the war were presented with a memorial plaque or what became known as 'death pennies' and a commemorative scroll. As



early as October 1916 the government set up a committee to investigate the feasibility of issuing families with a memorial plaque and commemorative scroll. Early in the process it was agreed that the government would cover the cost of such commemoration. In 1917 a competition was devised for anyone to submit designs for a bronze plaque which would individually record the name of every forces man and woman

whose death was attributed to the war. A prize fund of £500 was offered to the winning and runners-up entries. The winning design was by Mr Edward Carter Preston, founder of the Sandon Studies Society in Liverpool. The design incorporated the figure of Britannia. She is facing to her left and holding a laurel wreath in her left hand over the box where the commemorated serviceman's name was to be placed. In her right hand she holds a trident. In representation of Britain's sea power there are two dolphins each facing Britannia on her left and right sides. A lion stands in front of Britannia at her feet, also facing to the left with a menacing growl. As specified by the committee, the words "He died for freedom and honour" are written around the margin of the circular plaque. A very small lion, with its head facing to the right can be seen underneath the larger lion's feet, biting into a winged creature representing the German Imperial eagle. Incidentally when these plaques are scrutinised closely, to the right of the lions paw can be seen the letters ECP, Edward Carter Preston. The plaque shown in the picture above is that of Thomas James Lowe. It is currently on display in Kington Museum whose kind permission was given to include it in this commemoration of Thomas's life.

To accompany the plaque a commemorative scroll was developed. Beneath the words on the scroll would have been inserted the name of the casualty. Army form W.5080 was sent to the next-of-kin named on the



deceased soldier' personnel records requesting details of where the plaque and scroll should be sent. From 1919 onwards some 1,000,000 plaques and scrolls were dispatched to the bereaved relatives. The plaque was sent in an 'On His Majesty's Service' envelope. Inside the envelope was another envelope which held a letter from Buckingham Palace with the following message from the King:

*I join my grateful people in
Sending you this memorial of a
Brave life given for others in the Great War*

The letter was signed using a facsimile of King George V's signature. The scroll was sent by separate dispatch in a cardboard tube for protection.

To avoid confusion it is worth pointing out that rather coincidentally there were two Thomas James Lowe's living in Kington at this time, both of whom were killed during the war. The first is recorded as James Lowe and the second as Thomas James Lowe. What is even more surprising is that the two Lowe families are entirely different families with only very distant ancestral links.

