

# William Taylor Welson

Private

55533

17<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers



William Taylor Welson was born in Gladestry at Llan-e-Felin Farm in 1887. Williams's father, William senior, was a farmer and leading light in the community and for some time churchwarden in the Parish Church of St Mary's the Virgin. However, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of July 1901 at the relatively young age of just 46, he passed away leaving the management of the farm to his wife Mary Ann. Mary had given birth to a second son Hugh Powell Welson, five years Williams's junior. Hugh also fought in the war but suffered severe shell shock, he survived and went on to follow in his father footsteps as Churchwarden at St Mary's. Educated at Lady Hawkins' School when William left school he was employed on the family farm at Llan-y-felin. When the recruiting officers arrived in Gladestry, the record shows early on in the hostilities, William did not hesitate in his duty and enlisted into the Montgomeryshire Yeomanry, service number 2779. When fully trained he was transferred to the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion as Private 11927 Welson and later Private 55533 Welson. Understandably, with the loss of her husband and her two sons at war, the farm at Llan-y-felin became too much for Mary, so in March 1916 the farm was advertised for sale. Upon its sale Mary moved to The Beeches in Eardisley.

The 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Welsh Fusiliers were heavily involved in the fighting in France and Flanders and our story now advances to Williams's involvement in the fighting during July and August 1917. The third Battle of Ypres is more commonly remembered as the Battle of Passchendaele and was waged between June and November 1917. The key objective of this assault was to divert German forces away from fighting to the south of British positions where the French were having a hard time and to give them some breathing space. Locally at the village of Passchendaele the objective was to force a German retreat by taking control of ridges to the south and east of the Belgian city of Ypres. The next objective was to take control of the railway junction at Roeselare some five miles further on, thus cutting the supply route to the German front. Previous shelling had destroyed drainage canals in the area and unseasonable heavy rain turned some parts of the battlefield into morasses of mud and flooded shell-craters. We now turn to the 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers war diary for details of their involvement in the action. Throughout July the Battalion were at place called Palfart in France, well behind the front line, undertaking training and general rest and recuperation. On the 16th of July they marched toward the front arriving at Seaton Camp on the outskirts of Proven, a small village on the border between France and Belgium. Here they



Steenbeek River near Langemark, August 1917

rested, carried out basic fatigues and generally made preparations for moving back into the line. On 29th July they continued their move forward getting ever closer to the front line, arriving at assembly trenches facing the town of Langemarck some two miles northeast

of Ypres, just after midnight on the 30th of July. The Battalion were told their objective was to cross the Steenbeek River and prepare the way for an advance on Langemarck. At 4.50am on the 31st the battalion left their trenches and advanced. Terrain and conditions were appalling and casualties were high with 324 Other Ranks and 16 Officers either wounded, killed or missing. William was one of those killed in action on that day. On the 5th of August the Battalion were relieved and marched back to Elverdinghe to regroup.

Confusion exists as to exactly when William was killed. The official records indicate it was on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August, but the Battalion were not fighting on the 5<sup>th</sup> they were in fact moving back from the front line. The confusion is clarified when a visit to St Mary's church in Gladestry reveals a stained glass window dedicated to William senior and his son William Taylor Welson. On the window it states that William died on the 31<sup>st</sup> of July 1917 while fighting in Flanders. Surviving family members tell the story that in fact William did die on the 31st but due to the terrible conditions at Steenbeek his body disappeared and was not

recorded as lost until the 5<sup>th</sup> of August. Sadly this sounds all too plausible. It is also interesting to note that the stained glass memorial depicts St George, in full fighting regalia, ready to fight for his country, a very fitting tribute to William. It was at The Beeches in Eardisley that Mary would have heard of the loss of her son and a report in the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September edition of the Kington Times informed the general public.

William Taylor Welson is remembered on at least four different memorials. His name is included on the Kington memorial, because he was educated at Lady Hawkins' School and on the Gladestry memorial because that was his birthplace and family home. On Eardisley memorial, because that was where his mother lived at his death and finally on the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial, panel 22, because his body was never recovered. He also has his own stained glass memorial in St Mary's Church, including his father's death, and a further stained glass window in the church which remembers all those lost from Gladestry in the First World War, seven in total. It is clear that William was truly loved and sadly missed.

The Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial is located on the eastern outskirts of Ypres on the road to Menin. Menin Gate is one of four memorials dedicated to those missing in the Belgian Flanders which covered the Ypres Salient. The huge memorial is located across the road to indicate the point where hundreds of thousands of allied troops passed through on their way to the front. Each evening at 8pm the traffic is stopped and the Last Post is played in the roadway under the memorials arch.

Ultimately Passchendaele was an allied success but casualties were immense. Exact figures are disputed but it is thought that Allied casualties were in the region of 250,000 injured, killed or missing, while German casualties may have reached as many as 400,000. For the unimaginable horrors William endured he was awarded the British War and Victory medals. His mother survived him until 1937 when she passed away aged 79.



St Mary's Church, Gladestry