

## **John Bentley**

### ***Private 201488, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Northamptonshire Regiment***

**John Bentley** does not feature on the Amersham War Memorial or on any of the Rolls of Honour, but he was buried in Amersham and his final resting-place is registered as a war grave.

He was born on 12 October 1885 to Henry and Mary Ann Bentley née Daire in the village of Wormshill, Kent, where his father was a gardener. The birth was registered on 16 November 1885<sup>1</sup>.

In the 1911 Census John was in service as a footman working at Lowther Lodge, Kensington Gore, London<sup>2</sup>. The house was owned by the former British diplomat and retired Conservative MP, the Hon. William Lowther (1821-1912), who was the nephew of the Earl of Lonsdale, head of the Lowther landowning family of Westmorland and Cumberland. Lowther and his wife, (Charlotte) Alice Parke, a society hostess and amateur artist, were looking for an appropriate setting to entertain their elegant friends from the world of politics and society. The house was built in Queen Anne style



Lowther Lodge

to the design of the architect Richard Norman Shaw and contained what was thought to be the first passenger lift in a private house in London. Alice died in 1908 and in 1911 the only family members resident in the house, which consisted of 36 rooms, were the Hon. William Lowther, his unmarried daughter Mabel and his married daughter Mary and her French diplomat husband, Paul Antoine Charles Vieugué. By contrast 15 servants were listed including a cook, a lady's maid, 2 housemaids, a kitchenmaid, a scullerymaid, a male nurse/masseur, a valet, a coachman and his footmen, one of whom was John Bentley.

We cannot be sure which of William Lowther's daughters was looked after by Annie Louise, but the household was not destined to remain long as it appeared in the 1911 Census. William Lowther died on 23 January 1912 and on 3 May Mabel Cecily Lowther married James Bey and the couple travelled that day to France, where they intended to live. In November 1912 Lowther Lodge was sold to the Royal Geographical Society, who made it their headquarters.

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<sup>1</sup> GRO birth certificate. Note that Mary Anne's surname is spelt Dare in the 1873 GRO Marriage Index.

<sup>2</sup> Information on Lowther Lodge: [www.rgs.org](http://www.rgs.org) and [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com). The above photograph by George P Landow is reproduced by kind permission from the website <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/architecture/normanshaw/5.html>.

The lady's maid, Annie (also referred to as Anne) Louise Shrimpton had been born in Coleshill, Buckinghamshire on 12 October 1881<sup>3</sup>. Her father Frederick was, like John's father, a gardener. In the 1901 Census she can be found aged 19 working as a housemaid in Eastfield, Sherbourne. Also working for the Weatherby family there was her sister Catherine. She had worked her way up to become a lady's maid by the age of 26 and may have helped her younger sister to climb the same ladder. Only wealthy people could afford to employ a lady's maid. She would take care of her mistress's wardrobe and jewellery and often became a trusted confidante, occupying a sometimes uneasy position between the family and the servants' hall. While the work was less arduous than a housemaid's, the hours could be very long. Prospective employers often looked for skills in hairdressing, dressmaking and the ability to launder and mend delicate items.

John Bentley and Annie Louise clearly kept in touch after the break-up of the household for they got married on 23 January 1913 in the Register Office of the St George Hanover Square district of London<sup>4</sup>. The certificate shows that John Bentley had taken a further step up the ladder and was a valet at Southcote House, Leighton Buzzard, while his bride was living at 6 Aldford Street, Park Lane, London. Henry Bentley, his father, is here described as a farmer rather than a gardener and one of the witnesses was a Henry Bentley.

John Bentley enlisted in the 3/4th Battalion of the Northamptonshire Regiment, which was a training battalion. According to the *National Roll of the Great War*<sup>5</sup> he volunteered in January 1916<sup>6</sup>. This was just before Lord Derby's recruitment scheme was replaced by conscription, so almost certainly he would have attested and returned to his employment to await call-up. He was then drafted to the Western Front in 1918 and served with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Northamptonshires. "There he saw much severe fighting and, being taken prisoner near Soissons, suffered many hardships until released on the cessation of hostilities. He unhappily died as a result of his ill-treatment early in 1920."

With this information to work on, we were able to find out more. In fact the death certificate shows that he died on 5 March 1919 in the King George Hospital of heart failure, having suffered from pulmonary tuberculosis for 5 months. This must therefore have been diagnosed around the time the war was ending. His civilian occupation is given as butler.

#### The King George Hospital

This emergency facility was set up in May 1915 close to Waterloo Station to receive wounded men arriving on ambulance trains and had an underground tunnel linking it directly to the station. The building was a recently completed warehouse destined for use by HMSO. Funds for 1650 beds at a cost of £25 each were raised in only two weeks by an appeal to the public. The building was so robustly constructed that it was not easy to install all the necessary plumbing and other services. By 1917 it was said to be the largest hospital of its kind. One unusual feature was the roof garden with its many small huts and perhaps John Bentley spent time up there to take advantage of the fresh air thought beneficial to TB patients. An album of photographs of this hospital survives, showing the Nightingale wards, the roof garden, operating theatres and some of the staff<sup>7</sup>.

The building still stands in Stamford Street, but is now known as the Franklin-Wilkins Building of Kings College London. A memorial to all the patients who died there, subscribed for by the nursing staff, stands outside St John's Church Waterloo.

<sup>3</sup> Date of birth entered on Anne Louisa Bentley's death certificate. She died on 7 Feb 1976 at Greenwood House, South Parade, Peterborough.

<sup>4</sup> We are most grateful to Celia Hooper for kindly supplying a copy of the marriage certificate.

<sup>5</sup> Vol XII, *Bedford and Northampton*, p 263. The information it contains was collected from those who served or their bereaved relatives soon after the war ended.

<sup>6</sup> The 3/4<sup>th</sup> Battalion moved to Windsor Great Park in August 1915 and from October that year was based in Halton near Wendover, which is easily reached from Amersham. Could this have influenced his choice of regiment?

<sup>7</sup> It is kept at the Army Medical Services Museum in Aldershot, ref RAMC/720, but a digitised version is also available through the catalogue of the Wellcome Historical Medical Library. A painting of one of the wards in 1918 by John Hodgson Lobley can be seen at the Imperial War Museum. See also <http://ezitis.myzen.co.uk/kinggeorgestamford.html> for a detailed account of the hospital.



The Shrimpton family descendants believe that he had been captured and forced to work in the salt mines as a prisoner of war.

Unfortunately very few records survive for prisoners of war.<sup>8</sup> It was not possible to tell from the *War Diary*<sup>9</sup> when he was captured, but the 2<sup>nd</sup> Northamptonshires were involved on two occasions in particularly desperate and confused fighting. They were caught up in the **Michael Offensive** on 21 March 1918. Sent in when the retreat had already begun, their priority was to prevent the line from breaking and they were forced back to Marchelepot, Ablaincourt and Rosières, then further to Caix and Moreuil. On 2 April, withdrawn from the line, they were at last able to reckon their losses as 23 killed, 122 wounded and 153 missing. Overall 21,000 Allied troops were taken prisoner on 21 March.

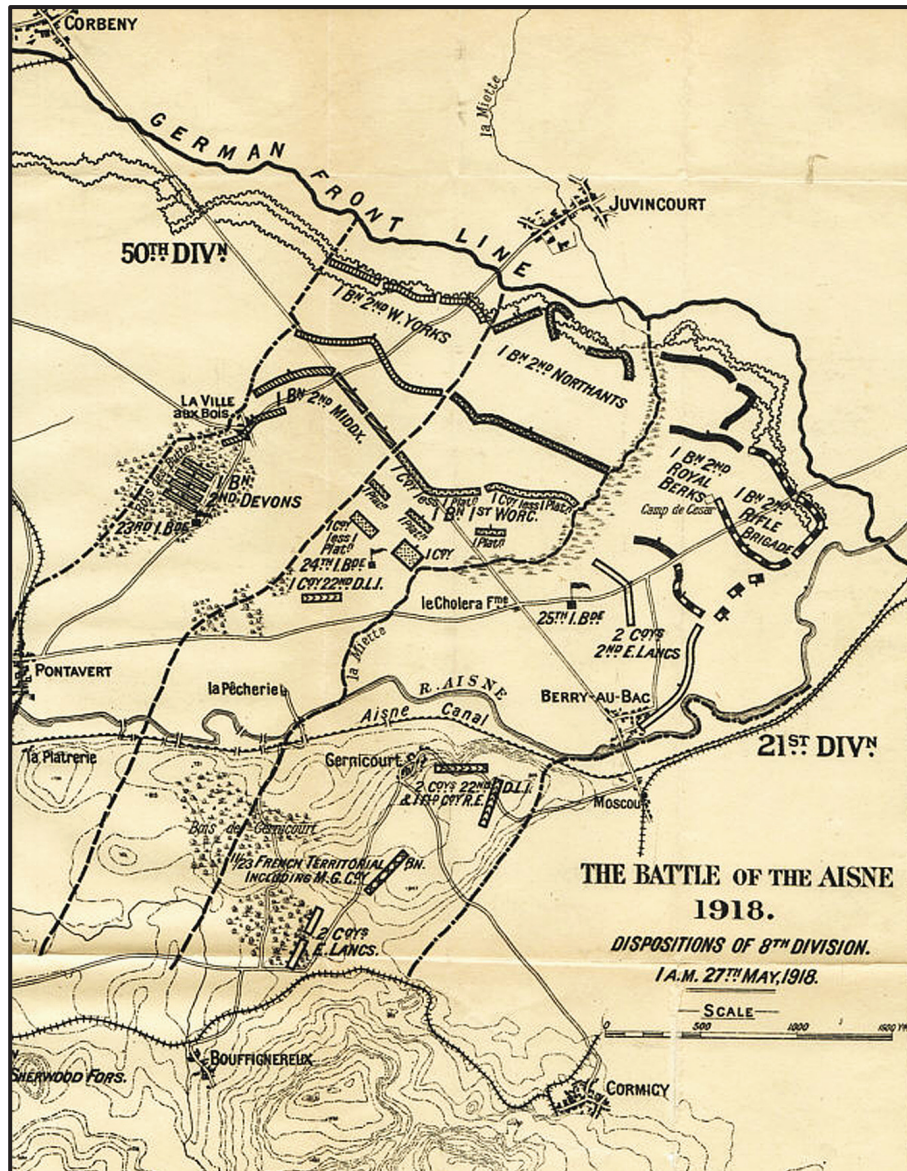


Image courtesy: Keep Military Museum, Dorchester, Dorset & Wikipedia

<sup>8</sup> No trace could be found in FO 383 at the National Archives, *The Times Digital Archive* or the *War Office Weekly Casualty List*. Further background information can be sought in S Paterson, *Tracing Your Prisoner of War Ancestors: The First World War*, 2012, and J Lewis-Stempel, *The War Behind the Wire*, 2014. The International Red Cross Card Index of POWs at <http://grandeguerre.icrc.org>, references PA 31617 and 32212, did produce useful information.

<sup>9</sup> WO 95/1722/3 at The National Archives. See also *The Northamptonshire Regiment 1914-1918*, 2005, especially pp 241-246 and pp 257-261.

With several other battalions who had suffered badly in this offensive and whose losses had to be made up by drafts of inexperienced troops, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Northamptonshires were moved to one of the quietest sectors of the front line at Berry-au-Bac, north of the **Aisne**, under French command, where no attack was expected. But at 1 a.m. on 27 May, with only a few hours' warning from captured German troops and no prospect of reinforcements, all hell was let loose, artillery, gas, and storm-troopers combining in an all-out assault. Once again a foggy night worked to the Germans' advantage. It is even more difficult to know what occurred as official papers including the battalion's *War Diary* were lost when the battalion was cut off and surrounded, but the regimental history concludes grimly that the battalion was "blotted out".<sup>10</sup> Such testimony as is available comes, significantly, from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Middlesex and the Durham Light Infantry (DLI), who were positioned behind the forward trenches.

The German bombardment, as they began their **Blücher-Yorck Offensive** at the start of the **Third Battle of the Aisne** was, according to witnesses, unprecedentedly heavy<sup>11</sup> and included gas.

Before the dazed survivors could mount any effective defence the storm troops overran the trenches taking both the 2<sup>nd</sup> DLI and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Middlesex by surprise. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Northamptonshires were surrounded and cut off.

What little information that is available in the regimental history<sup>12</sup> about the 2<sup>nd</sup> Northants came from a company sergeant-major, presumably after the end of the war. As soon as the bombardment lifted he set the remaining five soldiers he had available to man their trench while he went to see what had happened to the other platoons manning the front line, only to find that trench flattened. He was captured by a party of Germans and brought back to find two of his men dead, two wounded and the other a prisoner. The Germans permitted him to organise the digging-out of the blocked entrances of two deep dug-outs in which many men, some suffering from the effects of gas and shell-shock, were trapped. These were former German defensive works whose entrances, therefore, had faced towards the bombardment instead of away from it.

John Bentley is listed in German POW records as having been captured at Juvincourt on Monday 27 May 1918 unwounded, so may well have been amongst those trapped underground or caught in some other situation in which resistance was futile. He seems to have been taken initially to Giessen before moving on to Lamsdorf<sup>13</sup> in July. The record shows that he left that camp on 31 July. Prisoners from that area were put to work in salt mines in both the First and Second World Wars. No further information on what happened to him is yet available, but the death certificate indicates that it was around the beginning of October that he contracted pulmonary tuberculosis.

While there is, as yet, no proof of what happened to him, the manner of John Bentley's death is entirely consistent with his having been sent to work in the salt mines, where prisoners endured very harsh conditions, forced to do heavy work on inadequate rations. At Beienrode they laboured from 6am to 9pm seven days a week. Through lack of protective clothing and goggles they suffered badly from salt sores which had no chance to heal. After the war ended the British Government demanded assurances that prisoners of war were no longer being made to work in coal or salt mines. Such prisoners only gradually returned home, one hospital train having brought 120 sick men freed from the mines to the port of Rotterdam on 1 January 1919, the authorities having had great difficulty in discovering where they were held<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Those remaining amounted to 76 men and 4 officers who had been away on a Lewis Gun course.

<sup>11</sup> "An incredible 3,719 German guns had been amassed and the effects were almost beyond comprehension", Peter Hart, 1918, *A Very British Victory*, 2009, p 272.

<sup>12</sup> *The Northamptonshire Regiment, 1914-1918*, 2005, pp 256-261

<sup>13</sup> Part of Germany, Lamsdorf later became Lambinowice in Poland. The POW camp there was first constructed for prisoners of the Franco-Prussian War, was used again in WW1 and was renamed Stalag VIII B in WW2. Douglas Bader was one of its most famous inmates.

<sup>14</sup> John Lewis-Stempel, *The War Behind the Wire*, 2014, pp 110-111, *The Evening Telegraph*, 9 Dec 1918, *The Western Daily Press*, 7 Jan 1919. For further accounts of the prisoners' sufferings, see *ibid*, 19 Nov 1918, *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 18 Nov 1918, *Kent and Sussex Courier*, 27 Dec 1918.



John Bentley's death was declared by his brother-in-law William Shrimpton of 3 Station Road, Amersham, and this may help to explain how he came to be buried in Amersham.<sup>15</sup>

Annie's address at the time of his death was recorded as 41 Cornfield Road, Reigate, Surrey, although the grave registration report form has a handwritten note of his wife being Mrs A. L. Bentley of Pitsford, Northants and this is also the address given at the time of his capture. They had one son, Frederick Henry Montford Bentley, who was born in Loughborough and registered in the last quarter of 1913.<sup>16</sup> He died in 1992.

John Bentley was awarded The British War Medal, 1914-18 and The Allied Victory Medal.<sup>17</sup>

John Bentley is remembered with Honour and is buried in  
Amersham Consecrated Cemetery grave 320



On his grave are the words '*A good man kind and true, much loved by all who knew him*'.

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<sup>15</sup> William Shrimpton's medal card shows that he first went to France on 26 July 1915. He had served with the Northamptonshire Regiment as Company Quarter Master Sergeant no 12763 before being posted to the Worcestershire Regiment as Second Lieutenant. He was awarded the 1915 Star, Victory and British Medals, had a Mention in Despatches and continued to serve until 23 Dec 1920. On 6 Dec 1916 at St Mary's Church, Amersham, he had married Constance J King. In the *Absent Voters' List* of 1918 his unit is given as the 11<sup>th</sup> Officer Cadet Battalion. This was stationed at Pirbright. The closing date for applications to be included in the *Absent Voters' List* was 18 Aug 1918.

<sup>16</sup> GRO refs: 1913 Oct-Dec, Loughborough, Vol 7a, p 225; died Feb 1992 Peterborough Vol 9, p 1366, aged 79, date of birth given as 9 Aug 1913.

<sup>17</sup> [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/medals](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/medals) ref: WO 372/2/110670