John Brill

Private 25356,[1] 11th Battalion, Royal Berkshire Regiment
Private 95473, 60th Company Labour Corps

John Brill's birth was registered in the January to March quarter of 1884. He was born at Chartridge, the son of John George Brill and Mary (née Dwight), who had married in 1866. To discover what John's father did for a living it is necessary to go back to the 1881 Census when the family (John junior not yet born) was living in Rushey Mead Cottages, Coleshill. John George Brill aged 32 was employed as an ostler and huntsman, so was spending his working life looking after horses, hounds and terriers. His wife Mary at 39 was seven years his senior and they had six children: Alfred, 13 and still at school, Esther, 11, Anne, 8, George, 5, Mary, 3, and Sarah, aged 7 months.[2]

Ten years later – in 1891 – Mary aged 49 was a widow, her husband having died in 1890, and the family has moved to Amersham Common. Only three children remain at home – John aged 7 is still at school, as is his sister Mary, now 13. George, 15, is bringing in a wage as an agricultural labourer.

By 1901 all three children are employed: George has become a bricklayer's labourer, Mary is a parlourmaid and John, now 17, is a wood-turner working in a local factory. Since John's father had died when he was only 6, there can have been little opportunity for the skills of his trade to be passed on from father to son, but in any case from the beginning of the twentieth century many people who customarily worked with horses would have to convert to new technology as transport became increasingly mechanised.

Only two years later, in the January to March quarter of 1903, John Brill, aged only about 19, married Millicent Elizabeth Cox, in time for the arrival of their first daughter, Ivy Mary Brill, whose birth was registered in the April-June quarter of 1903. By the time of the 1911 Census, John's mother Mary Brill, now aged 69, was living in a three-roomed house in Chestnut Lane as head of the household, together with John, his wife Millicent Elizabeth, born in Chesham Bois, and their two daughters Ivy Mary, now 7, and Elsie Annie [or Hilda],[3] aged 5. John is following in his brother's footsteps as a bricklayer's labourer. Mary, now 69, is listed as head of household and a more precise address is given for the family - Chestnut Lane, Amersham Common.

John was aged about 30 when war broke out and had family responsibilities. We do not know when he joined the Army, only that he enlisted at Aylesbury and joined the 11th Battalion of the Royal Berkshire Regiment. This was from its inception a Labour Battalion. Formed at Parkhurst on the Isle of Wight in June 1916, it moved to France on 24 July. Later in the war it was reorganised and in April 1917 split into two Labour Companies, the 160th and the 161st. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission records, however, refer to Brill's unit as the 60th LC while the Buckinghamshire Remembers website gives his unit as "150 or 60 Co LC".[4]

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[1] Note that on the medal index card the number is given as 25365. The service papers do not appear to have survived.

[2] Another birth, that of Nellie Barrett Brill, was registered in the last quarter of 1871. Although no corresponding death entry can be found, it seems likely that she died in infancy. Sarah also died, aged 8, early in 1889.

[3] The name is clearly written as Elsie Annie in the Census, but the birth registration in the July to September quarter of 1905 is for Elsie Hilda Brill. Two other entries for children born to a father named Brill and a mother named Cox in the Amersham district are for Hilda G in 1911 and Freda M in 1916. Similarly marriage entries in the Amersham district can be found for Elsie H Brill and Arthur W Hutchins in 1931 and Ivy M Brill and Cyril F Johnson in 1923, but these could only be authenticated by sending for the relevant certificates and so are beyond the scope of this enquiry.

[4] Although the Labour Companies do not seem to have war diaries, WO 95/5495 at The National Archives appears to record the deployment of units. From February 1917 the Labour Battalions transferred into the Labour Corps and came under the control of the Army Service Corps. For further detail see Geoff Bridger, *The Great War Handbook*, 2009, pp 163-4 and www.1914-1918.net/labour.htm.

The Labour Corps

While regiments expected to find their own fatigue parties to dig trenches and move munitions and supplies, from 1914 many created one or more Pioneer Battalions as a reserve of skilled labour to assist the Royal Engineers who organised the construction of trenches and dug-outs, the building and repair of bridges and railways and the digging of tunnels wherever they were needed.

Sanitation, medical facilities and even postal services[5] were all seen as vital for the health and morale of the troops.

As the war effort gathered pace, the need for huge amounts of manpower was felt, to keep supply and communication lines open. Skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labour was needed to perform the vital work which allowed the combat troops to keep on fighting. By the end of the war the Labour Corps consisted of about 389,000 men (more than 10% of the Army), and this included Indian and Chinese companies.

Some idea of the massive logistical achievement is apparent from bare statistics: in August 1914 120,000 men and 53,000 horses were deployed on the Western Front. By November 1918 this had grown to 3,000,000 men and 500,000 horses. Every month their requirements of 67,500,000 pounds of meat, 90,000,000 pounds of bread, 32,250,000 pounds of forage and 13,000,000 gallons of petrol had to be met. In contrast to the shorter German supply-lines, all of this would have to be taken to a port, unloaded, reloaded to be shipped across the Channel, then loaded again onto freight trains or barges to be taken as close as possible to the front line. It might then continue by narrow-gauge railway, motor transport or wagon drawn by horses or mules, or on the backs of draft-animals or soldiers. Finally some of the food and most of the munitions would have to be moved through narrow, zig-zag trenches obstructed by dead bodies, troops and stretchers being brought out. All this would take place probably in darkness and often under fire, as enemy gunners would have done their best to calculate the precise range of the most vulnerable points of the supply routes. Even in summer moving through the mud could be an exhausting process and fatal for man or beast who lost their balance. Much of the land being fought over was low-lying agricultural land which was reliant on a complex system of drains to grow crops. Once that was destroyed by shelling, the water stopped draining away.

The Labour Corps did not have great prestige, yet its contribution was vital. Its men often did their work in dangerous places and, as their badge indicates, were expected if necessary to drop their tools, pick up their rifles and fight. The cap-badge featured a tripod formed by a pick-axe and spade flanking a rifle, with the motto “labor omnia vincit” [labour conquers all].

John died at the very end of the war, on 7 November 1918, aged 34, at home in Chestnut Lane, of pneumonia secondary to influenza, and the death was declared by his niece, Eleanor Ing. His demise may have been due to the influenza pandemic which began in January 1918 and continued until the end of 1920. Most of those who died did so because they developed bacterial pneumonia.

Normally when a soldier died the separation allowance that had been paid to his wife would continue for 26 weeks (or 30 if he was posted missing). The widow would then receive a gratuity of £52 and a weekly amount based upon the soldier’s rank, the age of the widow and the number of dependent children. The amounts were increased at intervals through the war. From May 1918 the widow of a Private would have 13 shillings and 9 pence a week plus 6 shillings and 8 pence for the oldest dependent child and less for younger ones.[6]

[5] It is estimated that the Army Postal Services delivered about 2 billion letters and 114 million parcels during the course of the war, with an average of over 19,000 mailbags crossing the Channel every day.

[6] Thus a widow with one child would receive one pound and fivepence per week or £51 one shilling and eightpence per year. For more detail see Richard Van Emden, *The Quick and the Dead, Fallen Soldiers and their Families in the Great War,* 2012, pp 212-215.

John Brill was awarded The Allied Victory Medal and The British War Medal 1914-1918.

His body was buried on 11 November, Armistice Day, at The Platt Cemetery, Old Amersham[7] and in the succeeding days his family must have had to mourn their loss in the midst of the general rejoicing which greeted the end of the war.

John Brill is remembered with Honour and buried at
The Platt Cemetery, Old Amersham, grave reference 224

[7] We are again indebted to Janette Plested for kindly checking the burial records of the Platt Cemetery held by Amersham Town Council. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission's *Register of the Graves* for Buckinghamshire and the relevant Graves Registration Request Form have been made available on www.cwgc.org. This documentation shows that at the time of the burial the cemetery was unconsecrated and belonged to the Amersham and Coleshill Burial Joint Committee.