

Leonard Clark

Lance Corporal 8259, 1st Battalion, Royal Berkshire Regiment

Leonard Clark's parents were Sarah Ann Howe, who was born in Little Missenden, Buckinghamshire, in 1859 and Thomas Clark from Grove in Berkshire, born 1857. Thomas and Sarah were married at Little Missenden in 1879 and their first child, Louisa, was born in 1880. Five more children followed and Leonard, their third child, was born at Little Missenden on 22 June 1885 and baptised on 16 August 1885. Thomas had at first earned his living as an agricultural labourer and by 1911 was working on the railway as a platelayer (track worker).

In 1901, aged about 15, Leonard was working on Mantles Farm, Chalk Lane, Little Missenden for Albert Winter the farm bailiff and his job was as a teamster, that is a boy who drove a team of draught horses. This life cannot have held



Sarah Ann Howe Photo: Emma Cook



Leonard as he would have looked going off to France, but this was probably taken when he was a private in training, before India.

Photograph courtesy of L. Clark family

great appeal for him because he joined the army as a regular soldier in the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Berkshire Regiment on 29 May 1906, attesting at Reading.

As a typical 'County' regiment, the Berkshires had two battalions of regular soldiers: the First Battalion which was based at home in Aldershot and the Second Battalion overseas.

At that time, the 2nd Battalion was stationed abroad in Subathu and they moved to Meerut in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh in 1909.

After six months' training in England, Leonard went to join the 2nd Battalion in India in November 1906 and by 1911, he was a lance corporal. The photograph on the next page of him in his tropical uniform was taken in Meerut.

Leonard must have returned home after April 1911, as he would have been entitled to after five years of active service, and joined the 1st Battalion of the Berkshires. It would probably have been at this time that he met Hilda Alice Axtell, the daughter of Charles and Ann Axtell of West End, Weston Turville.

Charles, an invalid unable to work, must have been supported by his four agricultural labourer sons. Leonard and Hilda married in July 1914 and the following year, a son, Leonard C T Clark was born.



Leonard Clark in Meerut
Photograph courtesy of L. Clark family

As soon as war was declared in August 1914, the 1st Battalion, Royal Berkshire Regiment, as part of the British Expeditionary Force of around 125,000 men, left for France. They landed at Rouen on 13 August and marched through the town, headed by the drums. They were to see active service as part of the 6th Infantry Brigade in the 2nd Infantry Division.

By 22 August 1914 the battalion had marched to within five miles of Mons in Belgium and started to dig trenches in preparation for meeting the Germans. They soon came under enemy artillery fire. Unfortunately, the retreat of the French 5th Army, leaving the BEF dangerously exposed to the risk of being surrounded and destroyed by the German 1st Army, necessitated strategic retreat from Mons. The battalion marched south towards the Seine, covering about twenty miles a day until the 5 September, when they turned north to embark on an offensive.

An excellent account of the battalion appears in the book *“The China Dragon’s Tales – The First Battalion of the Royal Berkshire Regiment in the Great War”*. The China Dragon is the emblem of the regiment and is that of the uniform cap badge.

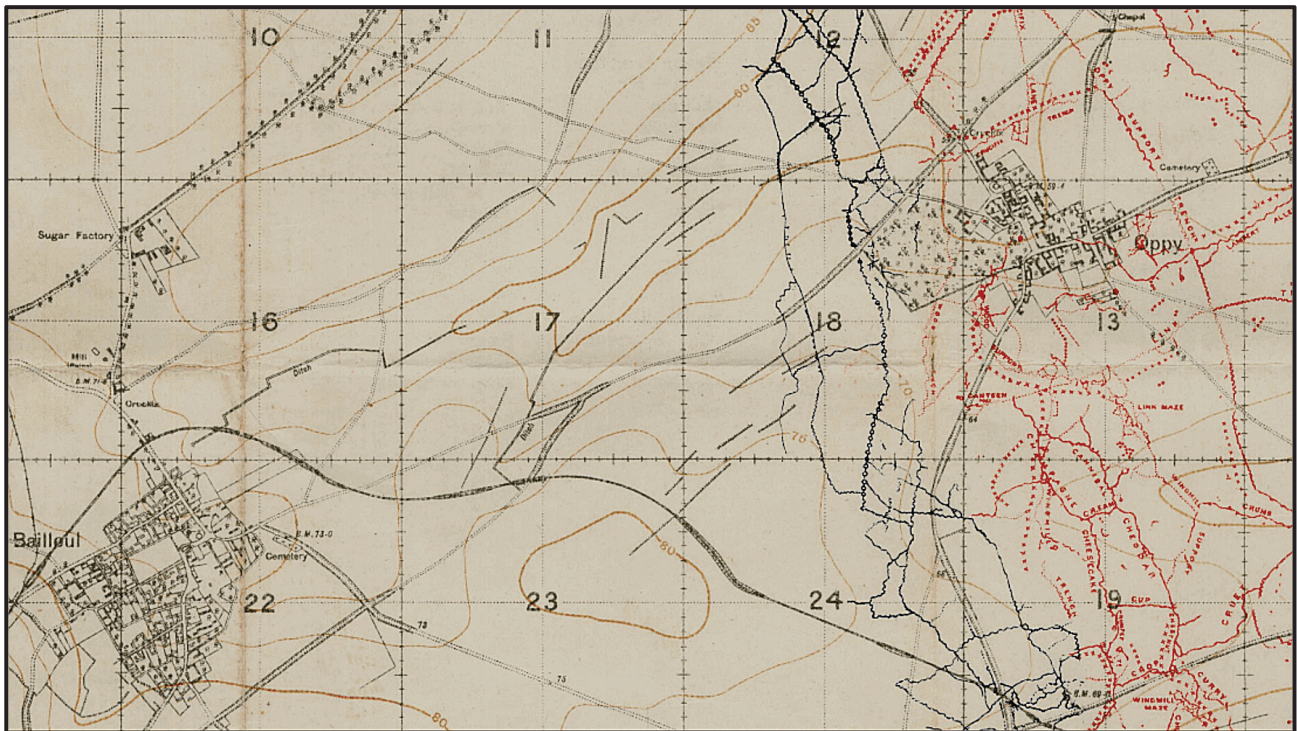
They saw action in many notable battles: **La Metz, the First Battle of Ypres, Festubert, Loos and the Somme**. The dismal record of

fatal casualties was interspersed with quieter and safer interludes. There was relief from the trenches with much time spent training and even rest and recreation. The losses in battle were made up by fresh detachments of recruits sent out from England.

Leonard had survived many hardships and fearful danger when his life was ended near the northern French town of Arras in **the Battle of Arleux** in April 1917. On the 11 April, the 1st Royal Berkshires moved up to the line and spent two weeks occupying former German trenches to the east of the small town of Bailleul. The weather was very bad: snow, frozen ground and rain turning all to mud.

It had become strategically important to capture the German-held village of Oppy, to the west of which lay a small wood. On 28 April 1917, parts of the seriously under-strength 2nd Division made a completely unsuccessful attack on Oppy and the town of Arleux to the north. The Oppy line was heavily protected with barbed wire and Oppy Wood was a mass of shell holes and collapsed trees among which platforms for enemy machine gunners had been constructed.

The attack was renewed on 29 April after the men had “been a week in dugouts and trenches now with little or no kit, and it’s chiefly absence of sleep and good food, and the incessant tinned food that exhaust the men – far more than the actual excitement of shell fire and fighting”. Captain Valentine of the 1st Royal Berks noted that his men looked as though, “...going over the top were an everyday occurrence, even though they were loaded down like a lot of furniture removers with all



Trench map of Oppy, German trenches are shown in red, British positions lie to the west. Details of British positions are not shown in case the map was to fall into enemy hands.

the implements of war, utensils, sandbags, food and ammunition".¹

The Berkshires formed up at 3.50 am, the artillery barrage commenced at 4.00 am and the infantry started forward. They found a gap in the wire and took the enemy trench in 15 minutes. By 9 am, they had repulsed four separate counter-attacks but were left in a vulnerable position.

By mid-morning they were down to less than half strength and were out of ammunition, forcing 'A' and 'B' Companies to retire to the old British line while the remaining 35 men of 'C' company made their way north along a trench to join up with the 5th Infantry Brigade

Brigadier General Kellett wrote, "During this severe fighting the action of the 1st Royal Berks was beyond all praise. Towards the end practically all the Lewis [machine] gunners were killed or wounded".² Of the 250 men who had launched the attack on Oppy Wood, 151 had become casualties with 15 killed and 47 missing. Lance Corporal Leonard Clark was one of the fatalities, losing his life at the age of 31. He has no known grave.



'Oppy Wood 1917 Evening'
by John Nash
Original in the Imperial War Museum
© IWM (Art.IWM ART 2243)

¹ *Oppy Wood* by David Bilton, page 63, published 2005 Pen and Sword, ISBN1 84415 248 0

² Wyrall, Everard, *The History of the Second Division 1914-1918*, Vol 2, Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1921, p.431

Name.	Corps.	Rank.	Regt. No.
CLARK.	1/R BERTS	Pte	8269.
Leonard			
Medal.	Roll.	Page.	Remarks.
VICTORY	2/105134	660	Killed
BRITISH	2/105134	660	
14 STAC	2/2/1	23.	
Clasp 14/1/1918.			
Theatre of War first served in			
Date of entry therein 13/8/14			

His Medal Roll index card states that Leonard Clark was awarded, in addition to The Allied Victory Medal and The British War Medal, 1914-18, The 1914 Star with Clasp.

The 1914 Star was issued to officers and men of the British Forces who served in France and Belgium between 5 August and 23 November 1914 and the clasp was awarded to those who had operated within range of enemy mobile artillery during that period.

Leonard Clark is remembered with Honour on the Arras Memorial, Pas de Calais, France, (Bay 7).

Leonard is commemorated in the Arras Memorial Cemetery in northern France. Recorded there with him are 335 other members of the British Expeditionary Force who died on that day, 29th April 1917, of whom 48 are fellow 1st Berkshires. Where their ages are given, they range from 19 to 44.



A generation of young men was decimated and for many young women, the chances of finding a husband were poor. Leonard's widow, Hilda must have been quite a woman for she married again in 1926 to a John Ladyman. He died in 1943 and Hilda married a third time in 1947. She outlived her third husband John Webb too and died in 1977 at the age of 85.

His parents, Thomas and Sarah, were also bereft. Leonard is remembered on their tombstone in Amersham as well as on the Amersham War Memorial and that at Weston Turville, where his wife lived.

The Clark family headstone, Amersham
Photograph by Dave Morris

