

Albert Victor Clarke

Private 24902, 4th Battalion, Grenadier Guards¹

Albert Victor Clarke was born in 1895 and christened on 5 September that year at Helhoughton in Norfolk, the son of Edward and Bessie Clarke.² Both parents were born in Norfolk, Edward at New Holkham and Bessie at Briston, and Edward was a gamekeeper. Albert was the fourth child and second son. Olive Blanche had been born in 1888 and christened on 20 May at Buxton, Charles Edward in 1890 and Alice *circa* 1893.³ Four more children followed Albert; Harry, born 1897 and baptised 5 September at Helhoughton, Geoffrey born 1899 and baptized at Swaffham on 17 May, Reggie, born in 1901, the fourth brother to be registered in the Walsingham Civil Registration District, and finally Dorothy Cecil in 1905 registered at Mitford.

The family moved several times. In 1891 they were at or close by The Lodge, Bracon Ash, with their first two children, whose birthplace is given as Burton Lammas. The 1901 census is the only one in which Albert is shown with his parents. They are living in a cottage in West Raynham, which is part of the Rural District of Walsingham. West Raynham is recorded as the birthplace of the entire family, which does not accord with other censuses! The children range in age from Olive, 13, to Jeffrey, 1. Alice is apparently away from home.

By 1911 Edward and Bessie (unusually shown as Elizabeth) have moved to Harefield Place, Uxbridge. Edward is still working as a gamekeeper and their four youngest children are still at home. Here the birthplace of Harry and Geoffrey appears as East Raynham, Reggie's as West Raynham and Dorothy Cecil's as Weasenham, which lies between Fakenham and Swaffham. The couple have been married for 24 years and all of their 8 children are still alive. Harefield Place was the address given by Albert at his attestation for his next of kin, but he is not with the family. Instead he can be found under his full name, Albert Victor Clarke, lodging with Edward and Mary Ann Smith at Lilford Barnwell, Lilford cum Wigsthorpe, near Oundle, Northamptonshire. This time he is said to have been born at Fakenham, but it is very common for people who move away from their area to give the name of the nearest town likely to be recognized, instead of that of the village they were actually born in. Another discrepancy is that his age is recorded as 17, not 15. However, he is already holding down a skilled and responsible job as a gamekeeper and may well have found it better to claim a couple of extra years. His father must have trained him well, for even at 17 he would be very young for such a post.

Before the First World War, many wealthy families had estates in Norfolk, Scotland and the Shires which they would use for hunting, shooting and fishing in due season, just as the Royal Family still regularly go to Balmoral and Sandringham at particular times of the year. Sometimes ghillies and gamekeepers would be transferred to an estate owned by the same family in a different area of the country, be offered a job by a visitor or simply respond to the many advertisements appearing in the press. At the start of his career, Albert would have had to be prepared to go wherever the work was and may even have seen some advantage in going to different areas to broaden his experience.

¹ It was not until 22 November 1918 that, in appreciation of the outstanding service of the Brigade of Guards, King George V bestowed the title 'Guardsmen' on the lowest rank in the Guards regiments, who had previously been known as 'Private'. It was used retrospectively on many gravestones and memorials.

² GRO reference 1895, July-September quarter, Walsingham 4B 301. The most probable reference for his parents' marriage is 1887, April-June quarter, Loddon 4B 343, when Edward Clarke married either Laura White Daines or Bessie Metcalf, but it is impossible to be sure without seeing the certificate.

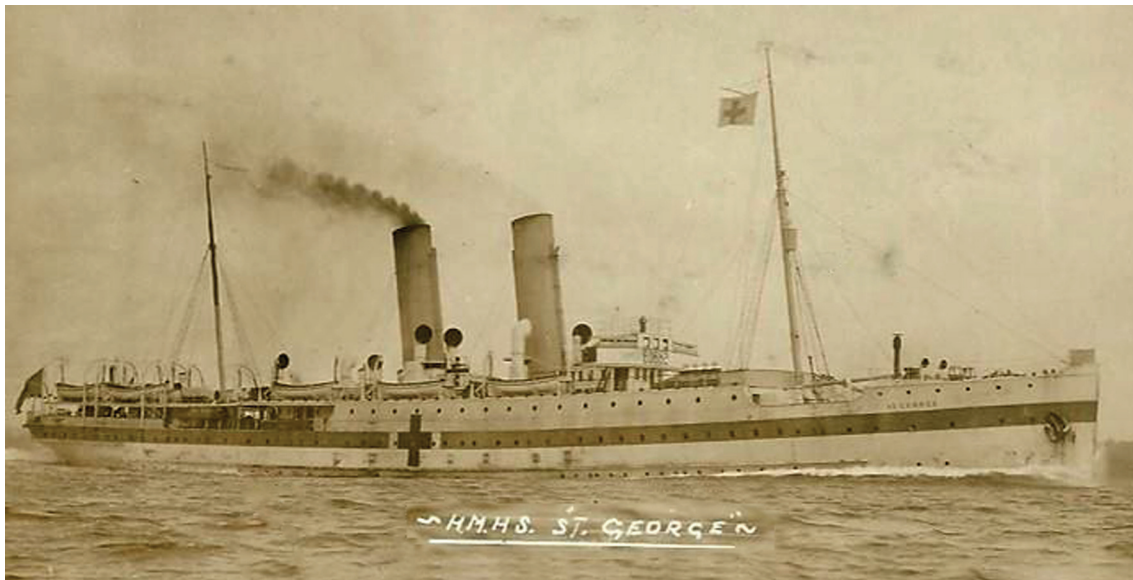
³ The GRO index offers many possibilities for Alice Clarke, but as her parents were living in 1891 within the Henstead district, then 1892, last quarter, Alice Maud Clarke, Henstead 4B 186, may be the right one. The first two children were registered in the Aylsham district.

Nothing more is known of him until 30 November 1915 when, claiming to be aged 21 rather than 20, his attestation papers were filled in at Uxbridge.⁴ He seems to have had to make his mark, which was counter-signed by a Sergeant, so his gamekeeping experience may have been acquired at the expense of some of the schooling he should have had. He stood 6 feet 1½ inches, must have been very familiar with handling and firing guns and is likely to have been a good marksman after years of shooting unwelcome birds. He was probably very well versed in fieldcraft. He was assigned to the Grenadier Guards and on the following day, 1 December, went to Caterham to begin his training, in the course of which he would have had to meet the most exacting standards.

He remained in England for the next nine months, then on 31 August joined the Expeditionary Force in France. It is probable that the next few weeks were spent learning about trench warfare in addition to all the other military skills he had already acquired. On 21 September 1916 he joined the 4th Battalion Grenadier Guards in the field. They had been formed at Marlow on the outbreak of war and now fought as part of the 3rd Guards Brigade in the Guards Division. This had been formed in France in August 1915, when all the Guards units were withdrawn from the other Army Divisions and welded together to form a single Division of their own.

The following day the orders were drawn up which would send Private Clarke into action with his battalion on 24 September, tasked with capturing Lesboeuufs. This formed part of the **Battle of Morval**, itself a continuation of the **Battle of the Somme**. Lesboeuufs was viewed as “one of the most successful operations in which the Guards Division engaged in the war”,⁵ but the battalion had paid a heavy price, 445 other ranks becoming casualties during the battle of the Somme, and was withdrawn from the line. Such was Albert’s introduction to war.

After five weeks in billets, the battalion went on to hold various parts of the line, rotating in and out of trenches. Albert fell ill and was admitted to hospital on 1 March 1917 with a ‘P.U.O.’ [pyrexia of unknown origin]. The cause of the fever was apparent two days later – measles. He must have got it badly as he was moved to Rouen with severe inflammation of his mucous membranes. Rouen is on the River Seine which allowed casualties to be moved by barge or small ships to England. On 27 March Albert boarded the Hospital Ship *St George*, formerly a ferry on the Irish Sea, and was transferred to the 5th (Reserve) Battalion to continue his recovery.



⁴ Our thanks are due to Captain AGH Ogden, Regimental Archivist of the Grenadier Guards at Wellington Barracks, for so kindly making these papers available.

⁵ Lt.-Col. The Right Honourable Sir Frederick Ponsonby, *The Grenadier Guards in the Great War of 1914-1918*, 1920, Vol 2, p 138.

He remained in England until just after Christmas. On 10 August 1917 at Seaford he was put on a charge for being absent. He forfeited 3 days' pay and was confined to barracks for 5 days, no doubt being put on extra fatigues as well.

On 30 December he was again in France, initially at Base Depot in Harfleur. He rejoined the 4th Battalion on 5 January 1918. On 17 February the battalion relieved the Durham Light Infantry at the Arleux Loop.⁶ They were to hold a front of 2,000 yards, supported from another line 1,000 yards back. The Germans, aware that new troops had been moved in, as anticipated launched a raid, in the course of which they ordered the Guards, in perfect English, to take off their gas masks. A fierce struggle ensued, with the raiding party, estimated at 2 officers and 60 men, being beaten off by 12 men and 1 officer.

Resting again in billets on 21 March, they were suddenly ordered forward again and sent to Blairville. The Battalion "was now to take part in 10 strenuous days' fighting, digging and marching, in open warfare of the kind associated with the retreat from Mons in 1914, and to forgo the comparative comforts of an established trench line".⁷ Albert lost his life during the first day's action as the battalion held the line to the east of the Ervillers-Boyettes road near Hamelincourt. He was 22 and had served 2 years and 114 days. The battalion was under heavy enemy bombardment, the prelude to an attempt by the German army to break through the line, and such was the confusion that for a while British shells were misdirected onto their own trenches. This was part of the intense fighting that took place in the Arras area when the German great attack began. Between 22 and 26 March 1918, the British Expeditionary Force suffered something like 75,000 casualties. Private Clarke's body was never identified, but his fate was known at the time and his parents were notified of his death on 9 April 1918.

The question must now be asked, why should Albert Victor Clarke, who was born in Norfolk, worked in Northamptonshire and apparently came no nearer to Amersham than Harefield, be commemorated on the Amersham war memorial?

Whilst in service Albert made a Will (undated) showing the family address as "Gamekeepers Cottage, Woodrow, Amersham." He left all his property and effects to his mother Mrs B [Bessie] Clarke,⁸ so clearly the family had moved to Amersham sometime after November 1915, and Edward may have been employed on the Shardeloes Estate.

Albert was the first of the family's sons to be killed. Two months later they would have to face the death of Geoffrey. A third son, Harry, was Gunner 209936 serving with the 1st Divisional Ammunition Column of the Royal Field Artillery.⁹ Reggie, born in 1901, may not have been called upon to serve.

On 15 June 1920 Bessie Clarke filled in Army Form W.5080, listing Albert's parents and siblings. In 1911 she might have taken justifiable satisfaction in having reared all eight of her children. Now two were gone.

**Guardsman Albert Victor Clarke is remembered with Honour on the
Arras Memorial (grave ref. Bay 1), Pas de Calais, France.¹⁰**

He was awarded the British War Medal, 1914-18, and the Allied Victory Medal.

In addition to the Amersham Memorial, he is remembered on the Roll of Honour in St Mary's Church Amersham and the War Memorial in Penn Street. For a photograph of the engraving on the

⁶ For these events see Vol 3, pp 1-8.

⁷ *Op cit*, Vol 3, pp 7-8.

⁸ Simple Will of Private Albert Victor Clarke from www.forces-war-records.co.uk.

⁹ See *The Absent Voters' List* for Amersham, 1918, no 162, p 4.

¹⁰ For details of the memorial and engraving, see the chapter on Memorials to the Missing.

memorial, refer to the section on Private Geoffrey Clarke. The Guards' Memorial stands on Horse Guards Parade.

On 5 February 1919 a memorial service was held in St Paul's Cathedral to commemorate all members of the Brigade of Guards who had died. Guardsman Clarke is listed on page 26 of the Order of Service. Each page has three columns of, usually, 54 names, yet it took 112 pages to list all those who had given their lives. The massed bands of the Brigade of Guards provided the music, including Arthur Somervell's Elegy *Killed in Action*, and the title-page bears a quotation from Ecclesiasticus, "Their glory shall not be blotted out and their name liveth to all generations."¹¹



From an old postcard, the caption reads "The largest assembly and military reunion ever known at a war memorial dedication. Stirring scenes at the unveiling of the famous Guards Division War Memorial on Horse Guards Parade, London, October 16th, by HRH The Duke of Connaught, before thousands of spectators, including the Prince of Wales, the Duke of York, and other members of royalty. An impressive scene was the march past, at the salute, of 15,000 Guardsmen, past and present members, mobilised once again from every corner of the British Isles, to pay homage to their dead warriors. Our picture shows HRH the Prince of Wales leading the Welsh Guards, (of which Regiment he is Colonel-in-Chief) in the march past after the unveiling ceremony".

¹¹ A copy is in the library of the Society of Genealogists at ARM/LST. Ecclesiasticus Chapter 44, vv 13-14.