

George Cooper

Private 27533, 5th Battalion

Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry

George Cooper was born in the last quarter of 1878 in Winchmore Hill, the son of John Cooper, labourer, and Louisa Ann née Green. Both parents were born in Ellesborough. By 1891 they were living in the parish of Great and Little Hampden and had a 14 year-old daughter Emily, also born in Ellesborough. George, aged 12 and still at school, came next, and in all the other Censuses his birthplace is recorded as Winchmore Hill, but here it is given as Amersham both for him and for Albert aged 9. They were followed by Ernest, 6, born in Great Hampden, and William, 2, born at Hughenden. Another daughter, Louisa, aged 1 and born in Great Hampden, rounds the family off. Clearly John Cooper, like many labourers, had been forced to move around to find work.

George went further afield to find a job and in 1901, aged 22, is lodging at 24 Guilsborough Road, Willesden, employed as a locomotive cleaner on the railway. This was the lowest rung of the promotional ladder which could have taken him from cleaner to fireman to engine driver.

However, he returned to Buckinghamshire to work as a labourer and on 1 April 1907 at Holy Trinity Church, Prestwood, aged 28, he married Kate Butler, 24, daughter of William Butler, labourer. George's brother Albert was one of the witnesses. In the 1911 Census the couple are living in Appletree Cottages, Prestwood. George has become a brickmaker and there are slight discrepancies compared with previous records. Both claim to have aged only two years since their marriage four years ago and Kate has become Mary Kate. George and Mary Kate now have two children, William George born in 1907 and Dorothy May born in 1909.¹ It is probable that Edward S Cooper, born in the third quarter of 1915 and whose mother's maiden name was Butler, was also part of this family.

George enlisted at Aylesbury, joining the 5th Battalion of the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry and served in France and Flanders. He was killed in action on 3 May 1917 aged 36.²

The chronicle of the 5th Battalion OBLI³ gives details of the battle in which George Cooper met his death. The section on 1917 (page 314) opens with the following paragraph:

"The Battalion had its full share of fighting in the first half of this year, suffering the inevitable heavy casualties, but adding still further to its splendid reputation. It took part in the great British offensive, which opened on the 9th April on a ten mile front, from the south of Arras to the south of Lens, and it was engaged again in the next great offensive on the 3rd May in the same area, losing no fewer than 185 of all ranks in the former and 300 in the latter."

Vis-en-Artois: The Attack on Hillside Work, 3 May 1917

"This formed part of the great British offensive which commenced on a 12 mile front to the east of Arras. Preliminary instructions and maps were issued secretly to certain officers at the end of April and on the 2nd May (9.15 a.m) came the final orders from H.Q. 42nd infantry brigade [of which the OBLI was part]. The attack was to be made with the 42nd brigade on the left and the OBLI was to be on the right flank of their attack."

"The battalion was to move by platoons at 3 minute intervals and arrive at the brigade H.Q. at 8.00 p.m 2nd May (Y-Day) and to file to their Assembly Trenches. Z-Day was 3rd May and zero hour 3.45 a.m."

¹ George's son, William George, married Winifred E. Ratcliffe in Amersham in Jun-Sep 1934. There is no obvious record of his daughter Dorothy having married.

² Information from the Museum of the Soldiers of Oxfordshire Trust, Woodstock, is gratefully acknowledged.

³ *The Chronicles of the Oxfordshire and Bucks Light Infantry 1916-17, Records of the 5th Battalion*, pp 314, 329, 330 and 332. Ref L.0004 in the Local Studies section of High Wycombe Library.

“The barrage commenced and German Artillery and machine guns opened fire within 3 minutes, causing a few casualties. At zero plus 18 the advance commenced and reached a new line about 50 yards west of the New Trench. The Germans, who had been holding the trench, retired to a line about 40 yards in the rear, from which they delivered heavy and accurate artillery and machine gun fire on New Trench.”

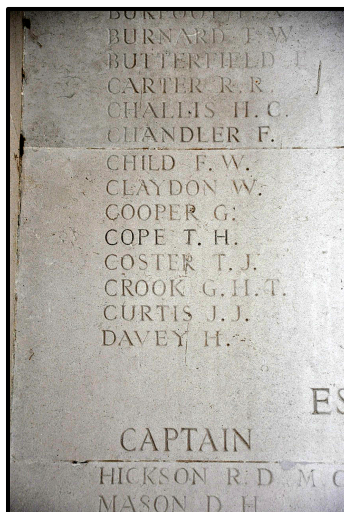
“At 10.45 a.m. there was a strong enemy counter attack in 6 or 7 waves (each was estimated by those in the front line, at about 150 to 200 men) launched against New Trench. The 5th Battalion was unable to stop the attack and their ammunition was almost expended. The remnants of the Battalion withdrew to the Assembly Trenches, which became overcrowded.”

Total casualties: 8 officers and 291 NCOs and men out of 12 officers and 523 NCOs and men who went into action. There were 111 NCOs and men listed as missing in the attack. One of these was George Cooper. He has no known grave.

The account of the battle was written by H.L. Wood, Lieutenant Colonel Commanding Officer, 5th Btn OBLI.

George Cooper received The Allied Victory Medal and The British War Medal, 1914-18.

As well as being listed on the Amersham Memorial, George is remembered with Honour on the Arras Memorial, Bay 6 & 7, Pas de Calais, France, and on the War Memorial at Prestwood.



Arras Memorial Bay 6 & 7, Pas de Calais, France, *Photographs courtesy: Chalmers Cursley*