

Reginald John Heybourne Fortnam

Private 31392, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry Private 57323, 3rd Battalion, Worcestershire Regiment

The story of young **Reginald John Heybourne Fortnam** is particularly poignant and certainly highlights the sacrifices made, not only by the young men who served and died in the trenches, but the suffering and heartbreak that the parents who survived them must have experienced.

Alice Heybourne, at 39, was ten years older than James Fortnam when they married in January 1895 at Wycombe, Buckinghamshire. Reginald, their only child, was born at Chinnor, Oxfordshire in 1899 when Alice was 43. It is not difficult to imagine what a special child he must have been to them, as childbirth involved many hazards in the late 19th century and at Alice's age was quite an achievement.

By 1901 James Fortnam had left Chinnor, Oxfordshire and was working as a cattleman in the Amersham area and living at High Street, Amersham with his wife and two-year-old son. In 1911 the family was still living at High Street, Amersham and James was employed as a farm bailiff, and Reginald, aged 12, was at school.

The school leaving age was raised to 14 by the Education Act of 1918, but prior to that very few children continued their education beyond the age of 12 and it is more than likely that Reginald commenced his working life shortly after the 1911 Census was compiled. The majority of children left school with a basic Labour Certificate indicating a minimum standard elementary education, presumably in the "3R's". It was possible to apply for grant-aided and free secondary schooling but very few children benefited from the schemes.

When WW1 was declared in 1914 Reginald was 16 and would in all likelihood have been in employment for four years by then. Unfortunately enlistment papers into the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (OBLI) at Aylesbury, Bucks are not available as those records would have shown what work he did in those four years between school and military service. Reginald was transferred to the 3rd Battalion, Worcestershire Regiment, but we do not know which battalion of the OBLI he served in or the date of transfer.



Cap Badge of Worcestershire Regiment.

From 1916, The 3rd Battalion of the Worcestershire Regiment was part of the 74th Brigade of the 25th Division and it was involved in many battles and actions at different parts of the Western Front. 1916 was the year of the **Battle of the Somme**, of which there were several phases. The 74th Brigade was involved in the **Battle of Albert**, and at **La Boisselle**. They took part in the attack on Ovillers where casualties were heavy and no significant gains were made. Another battle, which was a phase of the Somme, was the **Battle of Pozières**, when the 25th Division held the sector of the line north of the River Ancre. In the **Battle of Ancre Heights**, on the 26 September 1916, the 74th Brigade took over a sector just south of the River Ancre. A major attack

was made by the division on 9 October in appalling conditions and they captured the north face of the Stuff Redoubt.

Later in October, the Division HQ moved to Bailleul near the France/Belgium border and the forward units took over the relatively quiet Ploegsteert sector in Flanders.

In 1917, the 25th Division was involved in the **Battle of Messines**. The division was selected to make an assault with the New Zealand Division on the right and the Ulster Division on the left. Two

huge mines exploded at the beginning of the attack, at Spanbroekmolen and Ontario Farm. The action was described as successful despite the fact that 145 officers and 2907 men were killed. The action allowed the 25th Division to advance into the Douve Valley.

The **Third Battle of Ypres** took place in mid-1917 and the 25th Division was involved in the phase known as the **Battle of Pilkem**, which began on 31 July 1917, with more heavy losses. In October the division moved back to France and took over the Givenchy sector which they held for seven weeks.

Early in 1918 the 25th Division moved to an area near Bapaume and did manual work and cable laying, which must have been a welcome break from the fighting. Later they were to suffer more heavy losses at the **Battle of Bapaume** when they found themselves back on the old Somme battlefields of 1916. By this time the division was desperately tired.

The fighting continued almost relentlessly and the 74th Brigade struggled to defend the sectors they were holding around Steenwerck. Protracted fighting in the phases of the **Battle of the Lys** from 9 April 1918 left the 25th Division shattered, exhausted and fragmented. The 25th Div. held a narrow sector including La Clytte (De Klijte)–Kemmel Road and it was there that Private Reginald John Fortnam was killed in action on 30 April 1918, aged 19. From the beginning of the Battle of the Lys on 9 April, the 25th Division lost two thirds of its fighting strength. There is a memorial to the 25th Division in the centre of Bailleul.¹

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

Reginald John Heybourne Fortnam is remembered with Honour in
La Clytte Military Cemetery, Heuvelland, Belgium (Grave ref. V.C.1)

Reginald's parents remained in the Amersham area throughout their lives. His mother, Alice, died in 1942 aged 86 and father, James Fortnam of 'Eborn', Station Road, Amersham, Buckinghamshire, died on 27th January 1946, aged 79.²



Memorial to 25th Division in Bailleul, with thanks to Richard Howells. The memorial stands on a traffic roundabout not far from the main town square in Bailleul, where the Division fought in the Battle of Lys in April 1918.

¹ The information about the 74th Brigade and 25th Division was abstracted from *The Long, Long Trail* www.1914-1918.net

² Probate of James Fortnam's Will was to his brother, Herbert George Fortnam. Probate: London 3rd August to Lloyds Bank Limited and Herbert George Fortnam (brother of James Fortnam b. 1875, Chinnor, Oxfordshire) retired police inspector. Effects: £1,526,14s,11d.