

## **Leonard Gibbs**

### ***Sapper 61844, 77<sup>th</sup> Field Company, Royal Engineers***

**Leonard Gibbs** was born in Amersham in August 1893. He was the ninth of ten children, eight boys and two girls. His parents, William Gibbs (1854-1929), and Catherine Matthews (b.1855) were both born in Amersham, where they married in September 1871.

By 1881 William, a blacksmith, Catherine and their four children, Henry James b.1873 and Florence Catherine b.1876, both born in Amersham, and Arthur Edwin, b.1879, and Arthur Frank, b.1880, both born in Rickmansworth, were living in the village of Mill End, Rickmansworth.

By the time of the 1891 Census William, continuing as a blacksmith, had moved to Union Street (now Whielden Street), Amersham, with his wife, Catherine and children, Florence Catherine, a trainee nurse, and Arthur Frank. Also with them were Charles, b.1884, George, b.1887, Ellen, b.1889, and Sydney, aged four months, b.1890; these four children were born in Amersham and the three oldest were at school there. The eldest son, Henry James, 18, was working as a printer and lodging with Annie Dover at 25, Temple End, Chipping Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, according to the Census. (Chipping Wycombe was the formal name of the ancient borough and later municipal borough of High Wycombe; it was also the name of the parish which extended further than the borough boundary.) Henry James Gibbs died at the age of 26 in 1899 at Wycombe.

In 1901 the family were still living in Union Street and William was still a blacksmith. George, 14, was working as a grocer's boy and his younger siblings (including Leonard aged 7) were still at school. The older siblings had left home: Florence Catherine was in domestic service in Fulham, Arthur was a harness maker lodging in the 'Brewery Arms', Dorking, Surrey, Frank a wheelwright, living at Harrow Road, Paddington, and Charles, also a wheelwright, was working in Stoke Poges.

By 1911 the family had moved to High Street, Amersham. Leonard and his brother George were assisting in the family blacksmith business and Sidney and Cecil were employed as hairdressers. Ellen was a governess and at the end of 1912, she married Fred C Crook in Amersham.



This smart house at 26 High Street, Amersham, next to Apsley House on the right, was originally the forge where William Gibbs was the blacksmith. The name 'The Old Forge' is hidden behind one of the bay trees by the door. (photograph August 2014)



Badge of the Royal Engineers – WW1

Leonard Gibbs attested on 14 January 1915, aged 21, into the 77<sup>th</sup> Field Company, Royal Engineers, in London. Fortunately his Short Service Records have survived as part of the so-called 'burnt documents', which were not destroyed in the fire which consumed most WW1 service records. Some suffered water damage, however, and are not easy to read. In the documents Leonard's physical description indicates he was a well-built young man almost 5 ft 7 inches tall, with a chest measurement of 39 ½ inches, expanding to 45 inches, and his trade is given as a blacksmith.<sup>1</sup>

The 77<sup>th</sup> Field Company, The Royal Engineers served with 17<sup>th</sup> (Northern) Division, which was formed in September 1914 as part of Kitchener's Second New Army (K2). The Division trained in Dorset in the Wareham-Lulworth-Bovington area but later moved to near Winchester. They proceeded to France in

July 1915 and concentrating near St Omer. Leonard's Medal Index Card confirms that he entered the theatre of war in France on 15 July 1915, having embarked at Folkstone the day before. The division later moved to the front line in the southern area of the Ypres Salient.

Between 8 February and 2 March 1916 the 17<sup>th</sup> Division were involved in fighting at The Bluff, which was part of a number of engagements known as "**Actions of Spring 1916**". The Bluff was part of a narrow ridge along the Ypres-Comines Canal which was probably formed from the spoil when the canal was dug. It was an important high point in the flat plain of Flanders.

It was during this period that Private Leonard Gibbs went absent without leave in the field and neglected to comply with Company orders. On 3 March 1916 he lost two days' pay.

Also in 1916, the 17<sup>th</sup> Division was involved in the **Battle of Albert** when they captured Fricourt, and the **Battle of Delville Wood** which were phases of the **Battle of the Somme**.

The 77<sup>th</sup> Field Company, Royal Engineers, was mentioned in a despatch by General Douglas Haig, sent from General Headquarters and dated 19 May 1916.<sup>2</sup> The 77<sup>th</sup> Field Company were praised for their good work in carrying out or repelling local attacks and raids. In his despatch of December 1916, which covered the period from 19 May to 23 December, General Haig reported about the detailed preparation for **the Battle of the Somme**. It involved the laying of new railways, standard and narrow gauge, and trench-tramways. Long causeways were built over marshy valleys and trenches dug for telephone wires. As the water supply in the Somme area was insufficient for such large numbers of troops, additional bore-holes had to be sunk and water pipes laid. All this work was done by the Royal Engineers, including the 77<sup>th</sup> Company. Private Leonard Gibbs, with his background as a blacksmith would have played a valuable part in executing these works.

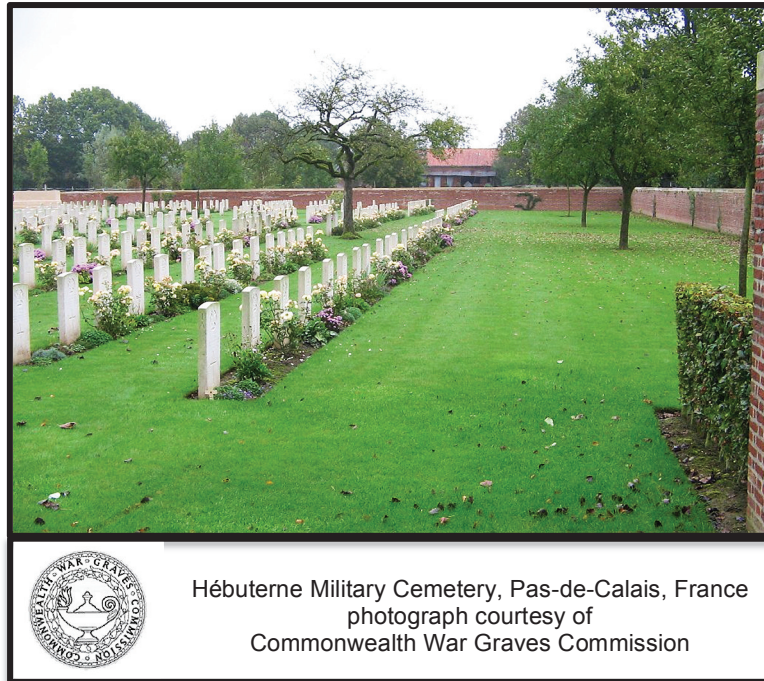
On 8 September 1916, Leonard was admitted to hospital. We do not know if he was wounded, but it was not serious as he left hospital on 15 September and re-joined his unit. He was killed in action on 13 October, 1916, aged 23, somewhere in the Somme area, near Hébuterne.

Leonard was awarded The 1914-15 Star, The British War Medal, 1914-18 and The Allied Victory Medal. These were sent to his father William Gibbs, who acknowledged their receipt. In a letter to the War Office, William Gibbs asked what exactly was meant by the plaque and scroll which, he had been informed, would be sent to him, and wondered if there was any gratuity due. He requested a detailed statement of his son's accounts up to the time of his death, but this was not forthcoming.

<sup>1</sup> British Army WW1 Service records, 1914 – 1920, [www.Ancestry.co.uk](http://www.Ancestry.co.uk)

<sup>2</sup> [www.firstworldwar.com](http://www.firstworldwar.com)

Leonard Gibbs is remembered with Honour  
Hébuterne Military Cemetery, Pas-de-Calais, France  
(Grave ref. IV.N.1)



He is commemorated on the Amersham Memorial and his name also appears on the memorial in Baptist Church in Amersham (now owned by the King's Arms Hotel).

The village of Hébuterne is situated 12 kms north of Albert in the Somme area. It lies near the summit of the watershed between the Somme and Lys rivers. It gave its name to a hard-fought action by the French on the 10-13 June 1915 and it was taken over by the British troops from the French in the same summer. Hébuterne remained subject to shellfire during the battles of the Somme.

Over 750 WW1 casualties are commemorated on this site.