

Mark Harris

Private 23745, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry Private 34694, 1st Battalion, Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry

Mark Harris's birth was registered in the January to March quarter of 1898 and he was baptised at All Saints, Coleshill, on 24 April, the third surviving child of Mark Harris and Elizabeth Reeves. His father was an agricultural labourer living in Stock Place, Coleshill. By 1911 the father was a carter and his mother Sophia, a lace-maker, had come to live with them. Thus the family seemed typical of the area and were making their living in ways that would have been familiar to generations of their forebears.

However, Mark's world may not have been as circumscribed as we imagine. His mother was a Shropshire girl and his father, before marriage, had worked as a green-grocer's assistant in Fulham before returning to settle in his birthplace, Coleshill, working there for a while as a gardener as well as in farming. As a carter he would have had a skilled and responsible job, being entrusted with the welfare of the animals which supplied the power on which the farm depended, and with loading and delivering its produce. He would have had slightly higher pay and more job security than general labourers, who could be laid off in the slack season, but he would have worked long hours, feeding the horses early in the morning so they had time to digest their rations before exerting themselves, and no doubt checking them last thing at night. The family probably lived close to the farm on which he worked.

Boys growing up with that kind of background usually started work very early in life, contributing what they could by stone-picking, bird-scaring and gleaning and thus absorbing much of the knowledge they would later need to follow on in the same line of work. By 1898, when Mark was born, schooling had been compulsory and free for almost 30 years and he was no doubt sent to Coleshill School, which was then educating around 140 local girls and boys. The school logbook is not available in the Archives, but has been digitised by Buckinghamshire Family History Society and can be found on www.coleshill.org. Few pupils are mentioned by name unless they are verminous, highly contagious or have won a prize, and it would appear that Mark and his siblings avoided inclusion in any of these categories. Apart from inculcating the basics – reading, writing, maths and religious knowledge – the school was renowned for its achievements in art and music. Close observation was encouraged through nature study and the older boys tended school gardens in which they grew vegetables. As was the case with most rural schools, there were some tussles with local farmers wanting to entice the most useful boys away from school and into the fields, but again Mark avoids mention here. He probably continued his education until the age of 14 and then moved into some form of employment.

Even without the shattering impact of the First World War, Mark's life would have been different from that of his forebears as horses were being gradually replaced by motor vehicles and tractors. Possibly father and son argued about their relative merits. This was a change accelerated by the demands of war, yet throughout the conflict the army relied heavily on horse transport.¹ Mark's older brother, Arthur William Harris, joined up as a Special Reservist, aged 20, on 1 Sept 1914 and served throughout the war as a gunner in the Royal Field Artillery. Mark's uncle, Walter Harris, a farrier, joined the Army Service Corps in 1916 at the age of 36 and returned home in 1919 partially disabled after serving with the Expeditionary Force in Salonika.

¹ Having taken a Census of all the horses in Britain in 1913, on the outbreak of war the Army was able to requisition 140,000 of them in just two weeks. Some farmers lost as many as 3 out of 4 horses. This left many farms and businesses struggling to continue. For further information see R Van Emden, *Tommy's Ark*, 2011; S Butler, *The War Horse* and for a reassessment of the role of cavalry see D Kenyon, *The Horsemen of No Man's Land*, 2011.

Whether Mark laboured on the land or worked for a spell in London like his father, we do not know. Unfortunately his service records were amongst those destroyed in the Arnside Street repository on 8 September 1940 during the blitz, and his medal card has minimal information, so there remain few clues to follow. He appears to have enlisted in London in June 1916, aged 18, joining his local regiment, the Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (OBLI) and being given the regimental number 23745. He would then have undergone sixteen weeks of basic and battle training. Much of this would have consisted of drill designed to ensure that orders were obeyed instantly, whatever the circumstances, fitness training, including route marches of 15-25 miles carrying a full pack and rifle, and weapons training. This would be followed by battle training and preparation for trench warfare. As a Light Infantryman Mark would have had to be particularly fit, most such regiments training their men to march at 140 paces to the minute so that they could be rapidly deployed.

At this period of the war, much of the press reporting, with quotations from men serving, was very upbeat and full of sporting metaphors such as 'we can't wait to go in to bat'. The month after Mark Harris had joined up, on 1 July, the battle of the Somme, with its terrible casualty lists, began. At this point he may have been too preoccupied with each day's demands and too exhausted by the day's end to have reacted much to the news.

Not all recruits who joined the OBLI were able to continue in its ranks and many were drafted to other regiments on completion of training. It was probably at this stage that Mark transferred to the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry (DCLI) as his new number, 34694, is part of the series issued before December 1916.² We do not know at what date he went to France, but it is likely that he would have undergone further training there in preparation for trench warfare before being moved up to the front to serve with the 1st Battalion of his new regiment, which was then part of the 14th Infantry Brigade of the 5th Division. No doubt he would have become accustomed to being rotated in and out of the front line and to the miserable conditions endured night and day by the troops under bombardment.

By May 1917 the DCLI was playing its part in the **battle of Arras**, attempting to break through the German lines and in the hope that, to reinforce that part of the front, the Germans would move their resources away from Vimy Ridge, where a massive assault was planned.

The *War Diary*³ reveals that the weather during Mark Harris's last week of life was beautiful. The battalion spent the first three days of the month relaxing out of the line, enjoying bathing and sports such as cricket and jumping competitions. On the evening of the 4 May, a very hot day, they moved out of their marquees at Maison Blanche South, then at Nine Elms were issued with an extra bandolier of ammunition and two rifle grenades⁴ per man. Each platoon was allocated a guide from the 14th Canadian Battalion and in bright moonlight they moved up to the front line under light shellfire. Once they were in their trenches, they were subject to intense bombardment which included gas and tear-gas shells which went on until 2.00 a.m.

The entry for the 5th is laconic: "*Beautiful day. Heavy shelling.*" The situation on the following day was similar, but 8 enemy aircraft flew low overhead, photographing their positions. On the 7th the tables were turned, with the Royal Flying Corps shooting down 4 enemy balloons and forcing down 4 more. Balloons were often used to give artillery spotters a good view of where shells were

² I am greatly indebted to James Pearson, Archivist of the Soldiers of Oxfordshire Trust, for information about Mark Harris and in particular for linking regimental numbers to dates.

³ Downloadable from the National Archives, WO 95/1577. A miserable winter had been prolonged by snow falling as late as April 10th in that area of the Western Front, which no doubt made this spell of fine weather particularly heartening; see Lyn MacDonald, *1914-1918, Voices and Images of the Great War*, 1991, p 201.

⁴ Sir Morgan Crofton of the 2/Life Guards became acquainted with this weapon on 4 Jan 1915: "The grenade fired from the rifle was placed at the end of a long stick, which is placed down the muzzle. The bomb is fired by the action of the rifle being shot off, flies through the air about 250-500 yards, and bursts on falling on a trench. This grenade is quite small and on bursting scatters about 15-20 small pieces of iron, which are made up of the casing of the bomb, which splits up on explosion. Like all these new inventions, they are not infallible." Gavin Roynon, *Massacre of the Innocents, The Crofton Diaries, Ypres 1914-1915*, 2004, p 108.

landing. The writer of the *War Diary* allowed himself a rare literary flourish, commenting “psychologically the atmosphere was charged with premonitions of some swiftly approaching menace.”

At 3.45 a.m on 8 May they endured a heavy artillery barrage, followed by an infantry assault. At this point ‘B’ Company, to which Mark belonged, had been positioned in well-dug trenches sited to the east of Arleux Wood, as shown on the map included with the *War Diary* stamped ‘Secret’ and captioned in pencil ‘DIARY 5th MAY 1917’.

This was a day of heavy fighting and many of ‘D’ Company were killed counterattacking. The day ended with Arleux Wood still in British hands, but the name of 34694 Pte M Harris of ‘B’ Company was included in the immensely long typed list of casualties which must have been put together as soon as conditions permitted. He was killed in action aged 19. Although his fate must have been known, since he was not posted missing, his body cannot have been recovered for burial and so he is commemorated on the Arras Memorial as well as on the Coleshill and Amersham War Memorials. So far as can be established, no notice of his death appeared in the local press. His family would eventually have received The Allied Victory Medal and The British War Medal, 1914-18 to which he was entitled.



Photographs of Coleshill War Memorial
Courtesy: Hazel Garas

Mark Harris is remembered with Honour
Arras Memorial, Bay 6⁵

The Harris Family of Coleshill

Mark’s parents married in 1891 and he had two older siblings, Edith Annie (b 1892) and Arthur William (1894-1948). Four younger siblings have also made their appearance by the time of the 1911 Census, Ada (b 1900), Alice May (1903), George (1905) and Daisy Clara (1909).

Mark’s father Mark’s birth was registered in 1863 and he was baptised on 6th September under the surname of his mother, Sophia Wootton. In the last quarter of that year she married William Harris, whose surname Mark subsequently bore, and they went on to have Clara (1869), William Henry (1870), Eli (1875) and Walter (1880). William was an agricultural labourer just like his father John Harris, who was born in about 1796 in Coleshill. Apart from Mark’s mother, Elizabeth Reeves, who was born in Shropshire, his grandmother Sophia from Amersham and William’s grandmother, Elizabeth Goodridge, born in Chalfont St Peter, were of local stock and all contributed to the family finances by lace-making, straw plaiting, braiding or bead-work, all of which were traditional local skills.

⁵ For details of the memorial and engraving , see the chapter on Memorials to the Missing.