

Bert Hazell

Private 18486, 2nd Battalion Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry

Bert Hazell's birth was registered between July and September 1897, and he appears in the Censuses as the second son of Walter George Hazell and his wife Mary Elizabeth Keen. He seems to have been known as Bertie.

The family lived at Woodrow and Winchmore Hill. Walter George, like his father George Hazell, was an agricultural labourer and later a cowman. While his elder brother Sidney by 1911 had begun to learn chair-making, Bertie, then aged 13, had no apparent occupation. It is likely that even before he left school he would have begun contributing to the family finances in any way he could.

The children all appear to have attended Coleshill School and the names of Bertie, Joseph, Hilda and Edith all crop up in the school log book from time to time, usually when they were sent home for having 'a dirty head'. This no doubt shows what a struggle their mother was having in keeping her five sons and two daughters clean and fed.

Bertie was still nominally at school in February 1911, but his connection with this seat of learning was increasingly tenuous as the log-book shows [p186] that he had already been absent 88 times during that year.

Feb mt. Fred Rogers has been absent 78 times
Bertie Hazell 88 . . . and
Maud Glenister 103 .
during the present school year.

There is no further trace of what he did until he enlisted at High Wycombe, becoming a private in the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (OBLI). Bert would have undergone the usual sixteen weeks basic and battle training, plus the Light Infantry emphasis on marching at speed and rapid deployment.

The OBLI records show that, as a member of the Second Battalion, he entered the France and Flanders theatre of war on 14 October 1915, while his Medal Index Card specifies that he went to the region of the Marne.

Probably he would have undergone a further period of training in trench warfare before joining his battalion and embarking on the pattern of being rotated in and out of the front line. The 2nd Battalion was originally made up of regular soldiers and had landed in France on 14 August 1914, so Bert must have served alongside some very experienced soldiers.

Bert would have spent the winter of 1915/1916 as a serving soldier and probably experienced his first Christmas away from his family. From 1914 efforts had been made to ensure the troops received extra comforts at Christmas time in the form of cigarettes, food, gloves, scarves and socks. Many soldiers served for more than two years before being granted leave,¹ so his family may have seen him for the last time before he embarked for France.

¹ Bridger, Geoff, *The Great War Handbook*. Pen & Sword Military. 2009. pp 83-84

In the heat of summer 1916 Bert Hazell's battalion was on the Somme. On 28 July, four weeks after the battle started, they had to move up over ground strewn with decomposing bodies before spending the following day in preparation for launching an attack on **Guillemont**, a village at a crossroads just to the south of Delville Wood. They were to attack with the 24th Royal Fusiliers on their left and their objectives were Guillemont station and the hostile trench to the south of it.

Once the artillery and machine-guns had done their work, on 30 July 1916, the battalion went over the top at 04.45, when it was already daylight and 'much too late', as noted in Major RM Owen's diary. He went on to say: "The attack by B and C Companies on Guillemont station failed after repeated attempts, and so the attack (by A and D, towards Ginchy), failed also. We have 12 officer casualties and more than 200 men."²

Bert Hazell, aged 19, was one of the many who died that day. He is one of the 72,191 casualties of the Somme who are commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial, because they had no known grave.

**Bert Hazell is remembered with Honour on the Thiepval Memorial³
(Pier and face 10A and 10D)**

No further details are available of how he died: no details or photograph were published in the *Bucks Examiner* to mark his passing. He is commemorated locally at the Winchmore Hill Memorial Hall, as well as on the Roll of Honour at St Mary's, Amersham, and his family would eventually have received his medals – The 1914-15 Star, The British War Medal, 1914-18 and The Allied Victory Medal.

² Swann, JC, *The 2nd Bucks Battalion, Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry*. 1929. pp 114-115

³ For details of the memorial and engraving, see the chapter on Memorials to the Missing