

Thomas Henry Lacey

2nd Lieutenant, 17th Battalion, King's Royal Rifle Corps

'Chilcote', a rather large, elegant Victorian house in the area once called Amersham Common, was the birthplace of what was to become the biosciences company, Amersham International. In 1940, Dr Patrick Grove established a Radium refining laboratory in the kitchen there. Radium was used in the production of luminous paint, a vital war material required for the manufacture of instrument dials for ships and aircraft. Today, 'Chilcote', externally unchanged and well cared for, functions as the main reception building for a large facility operated by the organization GE Healthcare Life Sciences.



'Chilcote' photographed in October 2014

During the First World War, a telegram was delivered to 'Chilcote':

5/9/16

POST OFFICE (Inland Official) TELEGRAPHS. (Telegrams only.) No. of Telegram 43

Prefix Code Office of Origin and Service Instructions. Words Sent

M.S.3 CAG. O.H.M.S. At M. To By (Signature) C. J. Sinclair

I certify that this Telegram is sent on the service of the

Attention is called to the Regulations printed at the back hereof. Dated Stamp.

TO: Mrs Lacey, Chilcote, Amersham, Bucks

Deeply regret to inform you that T.H. Lacey, King's Royal Rifles died of wounds. Sep 14th. The Army Council Expresses Best Sympathy.

FROM: SECRETARY WAR OFFICE

The Name and Address of the Sender, IF NOT TO BE TELEGRAPHED, should be written in the space provided at the Back of the Form.

Courtesy: National Archives WO 339/38413

In 1911, 'Chilcote' was occupied by the Lacey family. Thomas Lacey had married Charlotte Marshall in 1872 and 'Chilcote' was home for them and their two sons, Thomas Henry and Edwin. A daughter, Charlotte Sophia, had already married, left the family home and was living in London. The Census that year recorded the occupation of Thomas, the head of the family, as 'export merchant' and notes that he was an 'employer'. The two boys, both unmarried, were employed as 'commercial clerks' possibly, one imagines, working with their father.

The Laceys had lived previously in Hammersmith, London where all the children were born. It is not clear what prompted the move to Amersham, which took place in about 1905, since the family had no apparent previous connection with the area. Thomas senior was seemingly quite successful in business and may have been attracted by a move with the family to rural Buckinghamshire. The availability of a regular rail service to London would have enabled him to travel in on business as necessary.

With any thoughts of a forthcoming war barely formed, life at 'Chilcote' was likely to have been comfortable and untroubled. By early 1914 however, there was no longer any doubt that a major confrontation in Europe was imminent. Thomas Lacey senior was not to be exposed to the horrors that followed however, as he sadly died on 30 May 1914. His two sons acted as executors of his estate which totaled in excess of twelve thousand pounds, so the family was unlikely to be placed in any immediate financial difficulties.

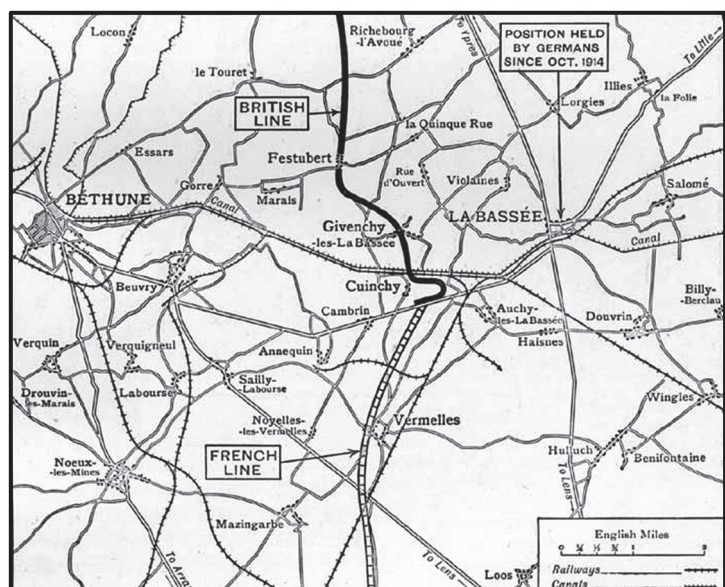
Thomas Henry Lacey applied for 'Appointment to a Temporary Commission in the Regular Army for the Period of the War' at Amersham on 19 February 1915. He was enlisted in the 13th Battalion, King's Royal Rifle Corps (KRRC) affirming that he was 'British born' and of 'pure European descent'. He answered yes to the question 'whether able to ride' and it was noted additionally on the application form that he 'can speak and write German'. He was confirmed to be medically fit and, after being interviewed by the Commanding Officer of the 13th Battalion, his appointment was recommended.

The 13th Battalion was, at that time, billeted in Amersham and Great Missenden so Thomas may have been able to join them almost immediately. However, he is not mentioned in 13th Battalion records nor does his name appear on a list of officers attached as an appendix to their *War Diary* entry of 30 July 1915 as they prepared to embark for France. In fact an entry on his Medal Record Card indicates that he entered the European theatre of war on 8 March 1916 almost exactly a year after enlisting and it is not clear how and where he spent the intervening period.

At some point, Thomas transferred to the 17th Battalion KRRC and on 7 March 1916 he is noted in a typewritten document filed with their *War Diary*. This lists the officers of the Battalion and his entry reads "2nd Lieutenant Lacey, T. H. – Transport Officer". He would have travelled with them, landing at Le Havre on the 8 March 1916 and thus confirming the entry already noted on his Medal Record Card.

At Le Havre, the party was accommodated overnight in tents pitched on snow-covered ground but entrained the following day for transportation to Thiennes to the east of Boulogne. One can only assume that this route, entailing a long period at sea and a total journey of over 300 miles, was dictated by demands and pressures on the transport system when many men and much military material was required to be moved to France.

By early April 1916, the Battalion was billeted in Bethune from where they would move into the Cuinchy Section of the front line to the south of Festubert, scene of a major battle almost exactly a year previously. Skirmishes with the enemy were to continue along the section of the line north from Cuinchy to Givenchy and Festubert following months with little ground being won or lost and casualties being relatively light.



Map courtesy: Milverton Associates Limited

At the beginning of August the Battalion moved into Divisional Reserve and was then ordered to march south some 60 miles to Bertrancourt, stopping en route at Marquay for a period of training in regard to assault formations.

On 31 August 1916, at Bertrancourt, the *War Diary* notes:- "Battalion stands fast awaiting orders to proceed to front line trenches". On 2 September they moved to the **Beaumont Hamel** section of the front line with orders to prepare for an attack on the German position the next day. The attack began with a heavy bombardment by the Brigade artillery followed by an advance on the German lines by the assaulting Battalions of the Brigade including the 16th Rifle Brigade and the 17th Nottinghamshire and Derby Regiment. On receipt of a message that these units had entered the German lines and requesting reinforcements, B and C Companies of 17th Battalion KRRC moved out in support under a heavy hostile barrage. The *War Diary* goes on to record that: "During the advance across No-Man's-Land, all the officers of these two companies and a large proportion of the NCO's became casualties, besides heavy losses in other ranks".

The entry for 4 September 1916 is devoted almost entirely to recording the numbers and some names of those who died or were injured the previous day. Among them is 2nd Lieutenant T H Lacey who died of his wounds. Not long after, on 12 September 1916, a terse note addressed to Mrs Charlotte Lacey, Thomas's mother, quotes the report from No 11 Casualty Clearing Station stating:

"Second Lieutenant T H Lacey died on the 4th September, 1916, from a Gun Shot Wound in the head".

Thomas was buried in Gezaincourt Communal Cemetery Extension and his grave "marked by a durable wooden cross with an inscription bearing full particulars". The cemetery, now in the care of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and having some six hundred graves, is sited on gently sloping ground just to the east of the village whose name it bears. The durable wooden cross has long since been replaced by a memorial of Portland Stone designed not to differentiate but to honour one among many who gave their lives for their country.



Photograph Courtesy: British War Graves

Thomas Henry Lacey is remembered with Honour and buried at Gezaincourt Communal Cemetery Extension, Somme, France. (Grave Ref: I. E.11)

When Thomas Henry Lacey enlisted, his date of birth, handwritten on Form MT 393, reads June 17 1879. Alongside the entry, in blue pencil, someone has written 35½, his age. In fact Thomas was born on 7 June 1873 and was already more than forty years old. The upper age for enlistment at that time was thirty-eight and Thomas, obviously being aware of that fact, had avoided the issue by pretending to be somewhat younger. He was not alone in this simple act of deception but it was the action of a very brave man.

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

Sources:

The National Probate Calendar for England & Wales (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858-1966

The National Archives ref. WO 339/38413

The National Archives, 17th Battalion, King's Royal Rifle Corps, *War Diaries* ref. WO 95/2586/0/567&568