

Bernard Lofts

Private 1966, 6th Battalion, Royal Scots(Lothian) Regiment



Photograph courtesy: T Collin

Bernard Lofts was born on 20 April 1891 in Highbury, London, to Alfred and Isabel Eliza Lofts and was their second child and eldest son. He had three brothers and three sisters.

In the 1901 Census the family were living in the High Street at Rickmansworth. His father Alfred was a grocer and provisions merchant. Their children were Mildred aged 11, Bernard (9), Frank (8), Norman (5), Wilfred (3) and May and Phyllis both aged 1. Also living with them were a grocer's cler and a grocery assistant, who were presumably employed in the business.

Bernard attended Watford Grammar School for boys and the school still has his record card with the following information:

BERNARD LOFTS - School no 800, Date of Birth 20.04.91.

Date of Admission 30th October 1900. Age on entry 9 years 5 months.

Date of leaving July 1903, age 12 years 3 months.

Father Alfred Lofts, High Street, Rickmansworth. Grocer.

Bernard completed his education at Bethany House School. This still exists as an independent boarding and day school for boys and girls aged 11-18 in Goudhurst, Kent. It had been founded by the Reverend Joseph Kendon in 1866, a man of great vision and faith who intended Bethany to be a community where each student would be treated as an individual and encouraged to reach their true potential in all areas of life. Alfred Lofts's grocery business must have been doing well for him to be able to send his boys away to school.

No details of his apprenticeship in Uxbridge have come to light, but in the 1911 Census Bernard was living in 35 Bridge Street, Cambridge, working as a shop assistant in a Drapery department. His parents still had a grocery shop in Rickmansworth.

This is confirmed by the report in the Bucks Examiner of 4 June 1915, which stated that Bernard lived in Cambridge and London before going to Edinburgh in 1913. He was an active church worker in all branches of the church's work, being associated with Emmanuel Congregational Church in Cambridge, Bloomsbury Baptist Church in London and Morningside Church in Edinburgh. While upon a visit to his parents at Amersham in June 1914 he took a great interest in the caravan mission at Chesham and Amersham.

Of the three drapers' stores Bernard worked for, only one is still in existence. The closure of the Eaden Lilley Department Store in June 1999 brought to an end the long association of that family business with Cambridge. After a spell in Cambridge, Bernard moved to London and worked for Hitchcock Williams and Company, a long-established drapers business in St Paul's Churchyard, London, which closed in 1984. An early proprietor of the firm, George Hitchcock, was involved with the Ragged School Union and the anti-slavery campaign, while George Williams founded the YMCA in 1844, initially so that young shop assistants and others could have somewhere to spend their free time other than in pubs and music halls. Jenner's Department Store now known simply as Jenners, is a department store located in Edinburgh, Scotland, and was the oldest independent department store in Scotland until its acquisition by House of Fraser in 2005.

The article in the Bucks Examiner also relates that Bernard joined the Royal Scots in Edinburgh in August 1914, but De Ruvigny gives the date as 2 September 1914.

Royal Scots . World War I saw the number of battalions increased to 35 of which 15 served as active front line units. More than 100,000 men passed through these battalions, of whom 11,162 were killed and over 40,000 wounded. Seventy-one Battle Honours and 6 VCs were awarded to the Regiment as well as innumerable individual medals. The active service battalions were involved in all areas from the Western Front to the Dardanelles, Macedonia, Egypt and North Russia.

The Royal Scots: the senior infantry line regiment of the British Army, it is often referred to as "Pontius Pilate's Bodyguard".

In the first week of November 1914, according to the Bucks Examiner, he went to the front with the battalion. They spent the winter doing trench work at the firing line and took part in the fighting at Festubert.

Although the Medal Index card tells us that Bernard Lofts was in the 6th Battalion, he appears to have been attached to the 8th (Territorial) Battalion. This was the first Scottish Territorial battalion to be sent to France, landing at Le Havre on 5 November 1914. As part of the 22nd Brigade in the 7th Division they were moved to the front line on Nov 15 and spent the winter near Flembaix, no doubt rotating in and out of the line.

The battalion sustained heavy losses in the set-piece battle of Neuve -Chapelle in March 1915 and again would take heavy casualties at the battle of Festubert in which their commanding officer, Lt. Col. Alexander Brook was killed.

The Battle of Festubert was in effect a second phase of the recently failed Battle of Aubers Ridge, which had been an unmitigated disaster for the British army. No ground was won and no tactical advantage gained. It is very doubtful if it had the slightest positive effect on assisting the main French attack fifteen miles to the south. Once again, the attack would take the form of a pincer attack with two assault frontages: a northern one along the Rue du Bois near Port Arthur and Richebourg l'Avoué, and a southern one at Festubert.

The Battle of Festubert began on 13 May with two days' heavy bombardment of the enemy trenches. British troops moved out into no-man's land on the 15th and many were killed by their own side's artillery, lack of effective communications making the coordination of a creeping barrage with the movements of troops very difficult. Bernard was killed the following day, 16 May 1915, aged 24.

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

Bernard's body was not identified and he is commemorated on panel 4 of Le Touret Memorial in the military cemetery of that name which lies beside the Rue du Bois just outside Richebourg in France.



Le Touret Memorial - Courtesy: Commonwealth War Graves Commission

Bernard Lofts is remembered with Honour on the Le Touret Memorial in the Le Touret Military Cemetery, Richebourg, France (Panel 4).

He is also remembered on the memorial in the Baptist Church (now part of the King's Arms Hotel) High Street, Amersham, and the Memorial at Watford Grammar School for Boys.

Bernard Lofts's brothers Wilfred, Frank and Norman also fought in WW1. Wilfred was in the Royal Flying Corps and was killed in action. Frank was in the 4th Middlesex Regiment and wounded at Beaumont Hamel. He was no longer fit for active service but served as an assistant Adjutant at Northampton. Norman joined the Machine Gun Corps and was taken prisoner on 21 March 1918 at St Quentin. After the war Alfred Lofts continued to live at Cranford, Chesham Road, Amersham, until his death on 4 March 1950. Frank by then was a manager and Norman an ironmonger.

The Marquis de Ruvigny's Roll of Honour (www.ancestry.co.uk) has a very full account of the life of Bernard Lofts and was compiled using information supplied by the families of the fallen, so that researching this soldier has been a matter of checking details and adding information where possible.

LOFTS, BERNARD, Private, No. 1966, 6th, att'd. 8th, Batt'n. The Royal Scots (T.F.), eldest s. of Alfred Lofts, of Amersham, co. Bucks, Provision Merchant, by his wife, Isabel, dau. of William Hicks, of Looe, Cornwall; b. Canonbury, N., 20 April, 1891; educ. Watford Grammar School, and Bethany House School, Goudhurst, co. Kent; was apprenticed to the drapery trade at Uxbridge; and was successively employed by Eaden and Lilley, Cambridge; Hitchcock Williams, St. Paul's Churchyard; and C. Jenner and Co., Edinburgh; joined the Royal Scots after the outbreak of war, 2 Sept. 1914; went to France, 2 Nov. 1914, and was killed in action at Festubert, 16 May, 1915; *unn.* Buried near Festubert.