

Albert John Redding MM

Corporal 66976, 112 Company, Labour Corps
Private 10792, 1st Middlesex Regiment



Photograph courtesy: Judy May (Redding)

Albert John Redding, a man of mystery, seemingly, remains an enigma a hundred years later, because he actually survived the First World War (the Great War), living until 1954. His name appears on the Roll of Honour scroll in St Mary's Church which is adjacent to the Amersham Memorial Gardens, but it is not included on the Memorial Cross in the gardens, although his son John Redding is (see elsewhere in this book). Both locations commemorate young service personnel who died in the Great War but the lists of names inscribed on them differ in a few instances.

The Census of 1871 lists Albert born in Amersham as the second child, at one month old, of parents John (32), (shoemaker, born Reading, Berkshire) and Sarah Redding (29), (needlewoman, born Holmer Green, Buckinghamshire). Their first child, a daughter, Charlotte aged 6, was also born in Holmer Green. The family home in 1871 was Norwood's Yard, High Street, Amersham and continued as such through subsequent Census records until at least 1901 by which time Albert John had married and become the head of a separate family. Throughout this same period Albert was variously recorded in Census Returns as either just John or Albert but as Albert J in 1901 and back to only being John in 1911.

The marriage of Albert John and Sarah Jane Woods (born in Chesham) occurred on 20 May 1891 at the Baptist Chapel, Amersham. Coincidentally, Albert's wife had the same first name - Sarah - as his mother. By the time of the 1901 Census the independent family were noted as living at High Street, Amersham. Both Albert John and Sarah Jane were then 30 years of age and had three sons, John (9), James (5) and George (1),¹ all born in Amersham. Albert's occupation was stated as chair-maker & auxiliary rural postman. By the 1911 Census their address was Bury End, Amersham and two further children had been born; namely Elizabeth (7) and Albert (1 month). Albert, the husband and father, was still a chair-maker and son James (15) was a gardener.

At his Attestation for military service in High Wycombe on 27 May 1915, Albert John signed to the effect that his age was 39 years and 2 months, whereas in reality he was 44 (another conundrum?). However, one can speculate that a possible reason for the discrepancy was the volunteering age limit of 40 years being the norm at the time. However, Albert was accepted by the Army and posted to the Middlesex Regiment one day later at Mill Hill, London. Prior to enlisting he was employed as a chair-maker by J.Hatch & Sons, Chair Factory, Whielden Gate, Amersham.

¹ Of the couple's sons, John died in Salonika and James served in the Rifle Brigade, surviving the war. George was too young to have served in WW1, although the family believes he tried to join up aged only 15. He later joined the Royal Irish Constabulary. Very sadly he was shot and killed in an ambush near Roscommon while out on a cycle patrol. The *Buckinghamshire Examiner* of 10 June 1921 reported his burial in great detail, noting how his body had been carried past the brass plate at the Baptist Chapel which recorded his brother's death. He was buried with full military honours, borne on a gun carriage and escorted by a detachment of the RAF. The grave, no 77 in The Platt Cemetery, was originally designated a war grave and had a stone inscribed "Killed at Killrooskey, Ireland, age 21". However the Graves Registration Report Form shows that the grave was initially listed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and then crossed out as it was not recognised as a war grave.

Albert John's British Army WW1 Service Record states his height as 5 ft 7 ins with a girth of 42 ins fully expanded and a 2 inch range of expansion. It includes also a 'Statement As To Disability' document confirming his details as Corporal 66976 Albert John Redding of 112 Company, Labour Corps and home address London Road, Amersham and his 'Age Last Birthday' is recorded as 47, a much more realistic and truthful statement. The next seven months were spent training, probably as part of the 5th Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment. He landed in France on 26 Dec 1915 and served with the BEF until 1 March 1916. A gunshot wound to the right shoulder sustained on 23 February 1916 may have earned him his ticket home. His name appeared as "Redding 10793 A" in the casualty list under "Middx R 1st" which proves that, despite his age, he was serving with a battalion of regular troops, many of which by this stage in the war were having to accept dilution by New Army recruits. The 1st Battalion's *War Diary* for 23 Feb stated laconically "In trenches. Enemy very quiet".² The battalion was near Cambrai and thick snow had fallen the previous day. Redding remained in England until the following February, spending part of the time at Watford, where he twice failed to appear on time for a tattoo. Having been admonished for his first offence on 1 October, he sinned again on the 23rd, this time being confined to barracks for three days, with stoppage of pay on both occasions.

He transferred to the The Queen's (Royal West Surrey) Regiment on 10 February 1917 and six days later embarked at Folkestone, bound once again for France. Although it is difficult to discern his cap badge in the photograph, it looks like the lower part of the 'lamb and flag' badge of this regiment. In April 1917 his unit was redesignated as 112 Company of the Labour Corps and his new number, 66976, was part of the series allocated to the 4th Infantry Labour Company of The Queen's Regiment.³ Recognition of his qualities soon followed. Promotion to Lance Corporal had been via a Field appointment 'Unpaid' on 12 November 1917, which was confirmed substantive 'Paid' on 20 March 1918 with upgrading to Corporal on 3 June 1918. He may have been involved in the grim and dangerous task of clearing up the battlefields after the end of the war, for it was not until 18 March 1919 that he was demobilised at Wimbledon.

The Labour Corps

The Great War was so called because it was a war waged on an unprecedented scale. Almost 6 million men served in the British Army and in the summer of 1917 almost 1.7 million were on the Western Front. Keeping combat troops fed and supplied with food and munitions demanded a massive effort in itself. For example 58,606,549 kg of biscuits and 168,745,000 tins of bully beef were supplied to the Army in 1918. Trenches and mines had to be dug, roads and railways built and maintained, depots and munitions dumps carefully organised and services necessary to the health and morale of troops rotating out of the line, such as baths, laundries, delousing stations, mail and even cinemas, laid on.

Supplies had to be brought up to the front line, often under fire or through thick mud over slippery duck-boards, when a heavily-laden soldier or pack-animal who lost their footing would drown. Much of the work had to be done in darkness. As both sides were well aware, disrupting the enemy's supply lines damaged their ability to sustain battle. As the war ground on, more and more labour was needed, skilled, semi-skilled and so-called unskilled. Large regiments such as the Middlesex had several such battalions. In 1917, so that they could be more efficiently deployed, it was decided that they should all be put under the authority of the Labour Directorate and redesignated as companies of the Labour Corps.

Men of the labour companies were not rotated in and out of danger like the front-line troops, but might have to remain within range of the enemy guns and aircraft, doing their jobs, for weeks at a time. Tackling hazardous yet vital jobs in dangerous places demanded a particular brand of toughness.

The Military Medal awarded to A J Redding was one of 444 which recognised the valiant services of members of this body of 389,000 men.⁴

² See *The Times* of 14 March 1916, p 10, col B, and the *War Diary*, WO95/2426/1, held at The National Archives, Kew.

³ AJ Redding has two medal roll index cards. One gives his number as Private 10792 The Queens Regiment, the other as Private 10793 The Middlesex Regiment. Both have his number in the Labour Corps, 66976. For the allocation of numbers to units see John Starling and Ivor Lee, *No Labour, No Battle*, 2014, p 328.

⁴ See J Starling and I Lee, *No Labour, No Battle*, 2014, p 346, which lists A J Redding's MM among the Labour Corps's awards and p 107 and pp 111-117 for the kind of hazards encountered on the Western Front.



Albert John Redding's Military Medal
Photograph courtesy: Judy May

The *Supplement to the London Gazette* of 20 August, 1919, announced the award of the Military Medal to Corporal A J Redding, 112th Company, Labour Corps, an award given in recognition of "gallantry and devotion to duty when under fire in battle". It was certainly deserved by one who, having probably cast himself as a younger man in order to join up, was wounded in action and then, having recovered sufficiently, returned to duty for the remainder of the war. It earned Albert John Redding the right to add the letters MM to his name.

His Military Medal is still in the proud possession of his granddaughter.

He also received The 1914-15 Star, The British War Medal, 1914-18 and The Allied Victory Medal.

Albert John Redding MM is remembered with Honour
on the Roll of Honour in St. Mary's Church, Amersham