

William John Slade
Private 9029, 1st Battalion
Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry

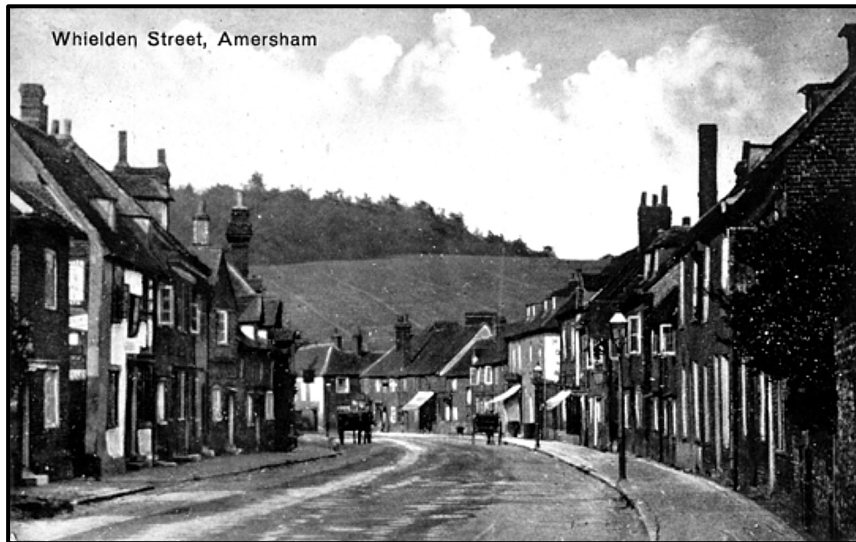


PT. W. J. SLADE
Ox. And Bucks L. I., Amersham
Killed November 26th, 1915
Courtesy: *Bucks Examiner*

At the time of the 1911 Census **William John Slade** was 22 years of age and already serving in the British Army. The Census *Return of Service Personnel* document shows William in the 1st Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, based in India, and that he had been born in Amersham. In fact William was born in Winchmore Hill, within the Amersham Registration District, in the period April to June 1889. His parents were James George (sometimes stated as George James) and Ellen Slade. James was also born in Winchmore Hill and Ellen was from further afield – Ashburn in Berkshire. The couple appeared in the Census taken in 1891, living in Penn Street with sons George (3) and William John Slade aged 2. According to the Census, James (an agricultural labourer) was 26 and Ellen aged 37, so she was quite old to be starting a family. By the time of the 1901 Census, the age difference between James and Ellen had shrunk from 11 years to 7! There was a third son listed, Joseph aged 10, born in Winchmore Hill. James had changed his occupation to coal carter and had moved his family to 6 Holly Cottages, Rickmansworth. George junior had become an errand boy and William J (12) was still at home. Towards the end of 1901 Ellen Slade died (aged 45) whilst living in Rickmansworth, which was in the Watford Registration District.

George James Slade married Louisa Irons in the April to June quarter of 1903 in Amersham. She already had two sons, George and Ernest, and according to the 1911 Census, the merged family was living in Whielden Street in Amersham. George James Slade senior was then a waggoner on a farm and his son Joseph (then aged 20) was a cowman. There were three additional children born to George and Louisa: John Victor, Hilda Violet and Dorothy Margaret, half-siblings to William John Slade.

William John Slade joined the army by enlisting in High Wycombe into H Company, 1st Battalion of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (OBLI) and served in India during 1911 and subsequently. During 1914 he was actively engaged in the Persian Gulf under the command of the 17th Indian Brigade of 6th (Poona) Division, Indian Army, before moving on 26 November to Mesopotamia. His Medal Roll Index card shows that he entered the Asiatic theatre of war on 5 December 1914. Major General Charles Townshend was commanding the 6th Division, which was at Amara in the autumn of 1915 until 2 September when it began to move up the River Tigris to take part in the operations for the capture of **Kut-el-Amara**.



Whielden Street, Amersham, where George James Slade, his second wife Louisa and family lived in 1911. It is likely that William John lived with them in their small house until he joined the army. (This picture postcard is dated 1916.)

The 6th Division was engaged next in The **Battle of Ctesiphon** which began on 22 November 1915. In his book *The Great War*, the historian Corelli Barnett writes of the Battle of Ctesiphon:

“On 22 November he (Townshend) attacked the Turks entrenched in a strong position at Ctesiphon, some 20 miles from Baghdad. Townshend’s plan was to hold the Turks with a frontal attack while he hooked around their left flank. Unfortunately his available force was not large enough to carry out such a plan. Turkish artillery and machine guns took a fearful toll of British and Indian troops advancing across ground as flat and devoid of cover as a table; Townshend’s attacking infantry division lost more than half its effectives killed and wounded. Under the shadow of the ruined Arch of Ctesiphon, all that remained of the ancient city of that name, Townshend’s hope of reaching Baghdad finally died.”

The diary from the *Record of the 1st Battalion* under the heading *Battle of Ctesiphon (With the Machine-Guns)*¹ states:-

November 22nd (1915) – “Fell in at 6 am and marched at 6.20. Heavy guns opened at 7, before sunrise. A gorgeous orange sky. 8.30 am – We have halted and I have the mules in a nullah,² under cover, just in rear of S Company (Forrest’s). Ctesiphon Arch is 2,500 yards by the range-finders – a wonderful ruin of tremendous size. There has been no sign or sight of the enemy and, according to map, we ought to be already in their first-line trenches. The map must be wrong. 9.30 am – The guns have ceased fire. We are going to advance in two lines of half-companies in fours. Machine-gun Section to follow in rear of S Company. Q and P Companies in first line; S and R in second line; 100 yards interval, and 450 yards distance”.

(It is not clear who wrote this section of the diary, but the diary breaks off here and the long narrative is written by Lt. Birch-Reynardson). Selected sections are quoted below:-

“We advanced for about 1000 yards, over ground intersected by small nullahs some two or three feet deep. At, I should think, about 9.45 am the enemy made his first sign by firing two groups of three shots each from a machine-gun on our left flank. This appeared to be the curtain-raiser, and soon afterwards shells began to arrive.”

¹ *The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry Chronicle. The Great War 1915-16, Record of the 1st Battalion*, pages 76- 79. Eyre and Spottiswoode Ltd.

² “nullah”: a small gully or ravine. This is a term used in South East Asia and reflects the fact that the regiment had recently served in India and Mesopotamia.

The narrative continues in a similar vein making reference, initially, to suffering “.....very few casualties” which quickly changed after receiving “sudden orders to advance at right angles to its (the Brigade’s) existing position.....right across the enemy’s front, at a distance of not more than 1000 yards. It was an opportunity for the Turks and they took it.....It was absolutely open and devoid of cover, and consequently, the losses were very heavy indeed.” A further problem was the ditches were half full of mud and water causing the infantry all manner of difficulties. For example, the *Chronicle* relates that “The Turks commenced to flood our ditch, and the wounded had a thin time of it, trying to keep their heads below the low bank and their mouths above water. Those who were badly wounded would have drowned had they not been held up. Nearly everyone who showed his head over the edge of the bank was hit by a sniper, and soon there were very few unwounded men in this part. Those who could still use their rifles had little ammunition left, so things did not look too bright.” An understatement no doubt, with carnage all around, heavy losses and ammunition spent, a terrible indictment of war but par for the course in this ‘Bloody War’.

Names of the fallen – either dead or wounded - are not specified in the *Chronicle* report so one can only speculate that William John Slade lost his life, aged 26, at this time. There is some confusion over the date of William Slade’s death. *The Buckinghamshire Remembers web-site* and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission register of graves state that he was killed in action on 22 November 1915, but the *Bucks Examiner* stated that he died on 26 November. In the light of the narrative in the *Chronicle* it seems most likely that William Slade was one of 450 other ranks who were killed along with seven officers, on 22 November. From 23 November 1915 the 1st Battalion OBLI was withdrawing from Ctesiphon and evacuating their wounded to Lajj. What remained of the 6th Division reached Aziziyeh on 28 November.

Private William John Slade is not commemorated on the War Memorial in Amersham, but only on the Roll Of Honour in St Mary’s Church, Amersham. He was awarded The 1914-15 Star, The British War Medal, 1914-18 and The Allied Victory Medal.

William John Slade is remembered with Honour
The Basra Memorial, Iraq, (panel 26 & 33)