

James Wellings
Private 23193, 5th and 3rd Battalion
Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry
Private 673659, 576th Company, Labour Corps

James Wellings was born in Woodrow, Amersham, in June 1882, the seventh child of James and Naomi (née Lesley) Wellings. Born in Chalfont St. Giles, James (Senior) was employed as a gamekeeper on the Shardeloes Estate, whilst Naomi, born in Seer Green, has no occupation listed on the 1881 Census, but staying at home looking after their family.

From the time of this Census the family continued to grow until James's tragic death on 27 August 1888, (caused by pneumonia and a severe kidney problem he had suffered for some time), aged just 42 yrs. At the time of his death they had 9 children, 8 of whom were still living when he passed away. Naomi was left to care and fend for Eva born in 1869, Charles born 1871, Louisa born 1873, Rose born 1877, Dennis born 1880, James (1882), Frank born 1884 and Horace born 1887. Another son Denis had been born and died in the same year, 1876, at the age of 8 months from whooping cough and inflammation of the lungs. His death was recorded at Shardeloes Park.

The 1891 Census shows the family still living in Woodrow, Naomi with no occupation, with Charles (working as a chair maker) and Rose (as a chair beader) supporting the family. Perhaps there was some assistance from the Shardeloes Estate following her husband's death. James aged 8 was at school. Louisa, aged 17, was employed as a housemaid next door to her family.

By the time of the 1901 Census the family had moved to the Broadway, Amersham Old Town, Naomi still being supported by her children living at home. Rose was working as a chair beader, Dennis as a bricklayer, Frank as a stable boy/groom, Horace as a journeyman butcher and James, aged 18 years, as a jobbing gardener.

In 1911 Naomi and her sons, Dennis and Horace, were living in the High Street, Old Amersham, whilst James had flown the nest, having met and married Mabel Elizabeth Verney.

It is not known how or where they met, as Mabel was born in Brixton, London (then part of Surrey) and James in Amersham. In those days that must have seemed a long distance apart, however, they were married on the 13 October 1907 at St Michael's, Stockwell Park Road, with James giving his occupation as gardener and his address as Market Square, Amersham. Following the wedding they returned to the Amersham area to live and two children were born, John in 1909 and Bertha Naomi in 1913. Sadly John died within a few days of his birth and a death entry can be found for Bertha Naomi Wellings aged 14 of 79 French Street, Sunbury on Thames, who was buried there at St Mary's on 30 April 1928.

The 1911 Census shows James and Mabel living as lodgers with Gwendoline Elwood at West View Cottage, Coleshill, Amersham, and his occupation is listed as a grave digger. Perhaps he performed this office also for Amersham St Mary's, as later the 1918 Electoral Roll shows him to be living in Church Street, Old Amersham.

The date and place of James's enlistment is not known, but it could be assumed to be High Wycombe, and the medal card gives no date for when he went to France. On enlisting he was assigned to the 5th Battalion Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry and in the early years of the war this battalion had seen a lot of action. Although threatened with being broken up in 1917, the battalion continued to serve until finally being reduced in April 1918, with only a cadre retained and this became part of the 18th Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment in June.

In December 1917 the battalion was very mobile operating in the Ypres area around Winnezele. On the 3rd they marched to Vlamertinghe for training, but were also required to supply Lewis gun teams

and working parties to units at the front. This they did until the 12th when they were ordered to the front line at Metchele (on the Passchendaele ridge) to relieve the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry where it is reported to be "fairly quiet, except for enemy artillery fire in the early morning". On the 15th they were relieved but suffered heavy casualties during the relief by the enemy discovering their position. They withdrew to Haslar Camp at St Jean where they stayed until returning to the front line on the 19th, where they remained until 22 December. On the 25th the battalion left St. Jean by train for St. Omer via Wizerne to St. Martin-au-Laert. The weather during the whole of this period was recorded as being very cold with severe frosts and with snowstorms, and in a light hearted moment the *War Diary* describes on the 27th the troops having snowball fights with units of the Rifle Brigade, whom they defeated.

On 2 January 1918 the battalion marched to Edgehill, between Derancourt and Buire-sur-Somme via St. Omer to Cappy-sur-Somme where they were billeted until the 19th, undergoing further training. After this they moved to various locations in a period of little activity, until being ordered back to the front line at Urvillie Wood on 2 February, where they found the trenches in poor condition and needing an enormous amount of work to restore them, which they undertook until being relieved on 12 February.

On 13 February 1918 James was transferred to the 3rd Reserve Battalion in England. This battalion was mobilised in August 1914 as a training and depot unit. Initially based in Oxford, the battalion moved to Portsmouth in October 1914 where it remained until October 1917 when it relocated to Dover. Here it remained until November 1918 when it moved to Tunbridge Wells. It is reported that at Dover the battalion experienced frequent air raids and hostile bombardment and raids from the sea.

Earlier in 1918 James had been transferred to 576 HS [Home Service] Company of the Labour Corps as Private 673659. Records such as War Diaries for units operating in the UK were not required to be kept, so it is not possible to know exactly how or where James was wounded.

However, he was wounded on 31 May 1918 and died on 23 April 1919 aged 36 in the Royal Herbert Hospital, Woolwich, where he had been admitted suffering from pneumonia which developed after he caught influenza. It is not known whether he was hospitalised for the full period of time between receiving his injuries and his death, or whether perhaps there were periods at home in Church Street, Amersham interspersed with bouts of hospital treatment.

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



James Wellings is remembered with Honour and is laid to rest in St. Mary's Cemetery, Amersham, Buckinghamshire, Grave no 1372

The Royal Herbert Hospital

Opened in 1865 for veterans of the Crimean War and named after Sidney Herbert, the hospital was set in 19 acres of landscaped gardens to encourage convalescents to enjoy fresh air and exercise in peaceful surroundings.

Designed by Sir Douglas Galton of the Royal Engineers, its construction influenced many military and civilian hospitals and followed the principles of Florence Nightingale, Galton's aunt, in ensuring that patients could benefit from as much light and air as possible.

Queen Victoria was so impressed by what she saw on a visit in 1900 that she became a patron. One of the VADs working there during the First World War, Enid Bagnold, wrote of her experiences in *Diary Without Dates*.

Civilians were also admitted there after the nearby Woolwich Arsenal had been bombed during the Second World War. It then became the Army's main orthopaedic hospital until the cost of maintaining the fabric forced its closure in 1977.

It has been redeveloped and now houses luxury flats with some communal facilities such as the bar and swimming pool.

Main Sources Used:

The National Archives - War Office Records

WO 95/1900 - *War Diary* of the 5th Bn. Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry

WO 372 - British Army WW1 Medal Rolls Index Cards 1914 -1920.

Oxon and Buck Light Infantry Records, Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum (www.sofa.org.uk)

The Long, Long Trail (www.1914-1918.net)