

The Army in Amersham

At the outbreak of war in August 1914 Britain was in the middle of a good summer and a bumper harvest was expected. Reservists were called up to augment the regular army and many units were sent to various theatres of war including Northern Europe, Salonika and Mesopotamia.

The British regular army, its reserves and the Territorial Force were all entirely volunteer formations and together they were only a fraction of the size of the armies of Germany, Russia and France where conscription for military service was compulsory. Lord Kitchener, appointed Secretary of State for War the day after Britain declared war, rejected the view that it would be of short duration and secured cabinet and parliamentary approval for the creation, in the first instance, of a New Army of up to 500,000 volunteers of all ranks who would accept to serve for three years or the duration of the war (whichever proved to be the longer) and in any part of the world where the army might need them.

Within a very short time the first of a succession of “Kitchener’s New Armies” came into being and was given the name K1. It was soon followed by K2 and K3. By 12 September more than 478,000 men had joined the army since the outbreak of war. **William George Cox** served in the 13th Battalion of the King’s Royal Rifle Corps which was formed in October 1914 as part of K3. Early in 1915, K4 was formed. By the end of 1915, 2.46 million men had enlisted voluntarily. Early in 1916 legislation was passed introducing compulsory conscription.

Recruits to the New Armies were used to form complete new battalions within existing regiments. These new battalions usually had titles incorporating the word “Service” in brackets before “Battalion” and the name of the regiment. Several of our men served in regiments with names including the word “Service”.

Many men were inspired to volunteer by the creation of what became known as ‘Pals’ or ‘Chums’ battalions. These were composed of men linked by their places of residence, their work, their professional, recreational or educational ties who were assured that they could enlist together and then train and fight together. The ‘Pals’ movement was especially strong in the north of England. A well known example is The Accrington Pals which became the 11th Battalion, East Lancashire Regiment though the informal name, like many others of the ‘Pals’ type, continued to be used. **Edgar Richard Chandler** enlisted in the 1/15th Battalion, London Regiment (Prince of Wales’ Own Civil Service Rifles). **Stanley Robert Cox** enlisted in the 10th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers which had the unofficial title of “the Stockbrokers” and even (a rare exception) the initials STK before their army number. The Church Lads’ Brigade provided the nucleus of the 16th Battalion of the King’s Royal Rifle Corps in which **Raymond Bowler** served.

Many regiments are represented among our Amersham men, but two of the important ones are described here:- The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (OBLI) and The King’s Royal Rifle Corps (KRRC).

The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (OBLI)

The Regiment had its beginnings in 1741, although it was not officially formed until 1841 when it became known as the Oxfordshire Light Infantry Regiment. It was not until 1908 that 'Buckinghamshire' was added to its title.



OBLI Battalions of the Regular Army

1st Battalion

The Battalion was in India at the outbreak of war and moved to Mesopotamia (Iraq) in November 1914 to take part in the campaign against the Ottoman forces that ruled the country. After a five-month siege the Battalion was captured in April 1916 following the surrender of the garrison at Kut-al-Amara. Of the 400 men of the OBLI captured, only 71 survived the mistreatment. A provisional Battalion was formed from reinforcements and members of the original Battalion who were not captured. They remained in Mesopotamia for the duration of the war.

Five of our Amersham soldiers were members of this battalion: **Henry Grace, Thomas George Irons, Frederick George Parslow, Thomas William Lee and William John Slade.**

2nd Battalion

The 2nd Battalion left its base in Aldersot and landed at Boulogne on 14 August 1914 as one of the first regiments of the British Expeditionary Force. On 23 August they took part in the first battle of the war at Mons, which held up the German advance so the allied armies could regroup near Paris. By Christmas they had taken part in **the first battle of the Marne, the first battle of Ypres** and routed the Kaiser's Prussian Guard at **Nonne Bosschen Wood**. In the first five months of the war they sustained 632 casualties and the battalion bore little resemblance to the one that had landed in France in August.

By 1915 trench warfare had commenced with both sides developing impregnable defences, which resulted in heavy casualties for little gain. In early May at the **Battle of Festubert** they suffered nearly 400 casualties including **Frank and Sidney Rogers**. At the **Battle of Loos** in September/October a further 263 casualties were sustained in a subsidiary attack at Givenchy. Following the **Battle of Loos** few of the pre-1914 officers remained, as they had either become casualties or been promoted and moved to other regiments.

In 1916 they took part in the **Battles of the Somme** and sustained heavy casualties including **Alfred James Lee and Bert Hazell.**

By 1917 the Battalion had moved from the Somme and took part in the Arras offensive in April, protecting the flank of the Canadian troops during their critical attack on **Vimy Ridge**. Over the summer they sustained over 200 casualties. Fighting continued during the autumn and finally, in November they took part in the **Battle of Cambrai**, which saw the first major successful use of tanks.

Heavy casualties were sustained in March 1918 at the Somme. In August they were part of the Allied Offensive and were involved in several battles that pushed the Germans back. After the Armistice, the Battalion crossed the German border and were stationed at Zons near Cologne.

By the end of the war only 66 of all ranks were still serving with the regiment from the original force that left Aldershot in 1914. Of these 39 had served throughout the war.

3rd Reserve Battalion

The 3rd Reserve Battalion was based in Oxford in August 1914 as a depot training unit before moving to Portsmouth later in August and then to Dover in October 1917. **James Wellings** was transferred to the 3rd Battalion and then to the 576th Company Labour Corps.

OBLI Battalions of the Territorial Force

Battalions in the Territorial Force were numbered in a way that indicated the obligations undertaken by their members. Those beginning with "1" were "first line" or "foreign service" units which had accepted to serve anywhere; those beginning with a "2" were "second line" or "home service" battalions. When a first line battalion went abroad its second line unit became available for home defence purposes and a second reserve unit, "3" or "third line" unit, was formed.

The OBLI Battalions in the Territorial Force were numbered 1/4th, 1/1st, 2/4th, 2/1st, 3/1st, and 3/4th. The only OBLI Territorial Force battalion that included one of our men was the 2/1st Battalion in which **George Castle** served.

After conscription was introduced in 1916 all soldiers had an obligation for overseas service if needed.

2/1st Buckinghamshire Battalion was formed at Aylesbury in September 1914 as a second line unit. In January 1915 they moved to Northampton, to Essex in April 1915, Salisbury Plain in January 1916 before landing in France in May 1916. In February 1918 they were disbanded at Germaine and the troops went to the 25th Entrenching Battalion. **George Joseph Castle** fought with the battalion and was killed near St Julien, Flanders during the **Third Battle of Ypres**.

OBLI Battalions of the New Armies

The OBLI Battalions of the New Armies were called "Service Battalions" formed for the duration of the war with new recruits. They were numbered 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th. In addition there was a 9th (Reserve) Battalion, plus two (Garrison). Battalions. The Battalions in which our Amersham servicemen fought and died were the following:

5th (Service) Battalion

This Battalion was formed at Oxford in August 1914 as part of Kitchener's First Army (K1) and, after landing at Boulogne in May 1915, became part of the 14th (Light Division). In September 1915 they attacked and captured **Bellewaarde Farm** but suffered heavy casualties. In August 1916 the Battalion took part in the capture of **Delville Wood** and a few weeks later distinguished themselves at the **Battle of Guedecourt**. At the **Battle of Arras** in April 1917, they captured 'The Harp' an extensive German defence work. The Battalion fought at Polygon Wood as part of the **Passchendaele** battle. On the 21 March 1918 it held its positions in the face of an enormous German attack until ordered to retire. The Battalion also took part in the defence of Amiens. In June 1918 they returned to England and the Battalion was absorbed by the 18th Battalion the

Gloucestershire Regiment.

George Percy Lane and **Edward Bolton** died on 9 April 1917 on the first day of the Battle of Arras. **George Cooper** was killed in the Arras area in May. **Charles Dyer** died near Messines in October 1917 and **Arthur Darvell MM** was killed during the Ludendorff Offensive in November 1917.

6th (Service) Battalion

This Battalion was also formed at Oxford in September 1914 as part of Kitchener's Second Army (K2) and landed at Boulogne in July 1915. It was placed in the 60th Brigade in the 20th (Light) Division. They spent the first year in the area of Leventie. In June 1916 they were defending the Ypres Salient and then moved to the Somme in August 1916 for the successful attack on the village of Guillemont. It was here that **George Stephenson Podbury** lost his life. The Battalion distinguished itself during the attack on **Langemarck** on 16 August and at **Cambrai** in November 1917.

The Battalion was finally disbanded at La Clytte in February 1918, with troops going to 2/4th and 5th Battalions as well as 14th Entrenching Battalion.

8th (Service) Battalion (Pioneers)

This Battalion was formed at Oxford (Cowley Barracks) in 1914 as part of Kitchener's Third Army (K3). They landed at Boulogne in September 1915 but moved to **Salonika** in November 1915. The Pioneers were involved in building infrastructure such as roads in the hills of the Macedonian front. The construction of the Lembet road involved 600 men daily for five weeks in December 1915. **John Redding** was serving in Salonika when he was taken ill suddenly with appendicitis. He died after an operation in July 1916.

By the end of WW1 the Regiment had been awarded 59 Battle Honours and 2 Victoria Crosses, but had lost 5,880 men.

(Thanks to Roy Atkinson of the Amersham Museum for his contribution to this section.)

The King's Royal Rifle Corps

The King's Royal Rifle Corps (KRRC) has a very different history from the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, which was essentially an amalgamation of two county regiments.

In 1755, Parliament voted the sum of £81,000 to finance the raising of a regiment of four battalions, each of a thousand men, for service in British North America. Formed in 1756, the new regiment was at first called "the 62nd" but, with the disbandment of the two earlier regiments, quickly became "The 60th or the Royal American Regiment of Foot". The Earl of Loudon, already in command of the forces in North America, was appointed its Commander-in-Chief.

The enlisted men were chiefly drawn from German and Swiss Protestants, already settled on land assigned to them by the British Government. They would be required to serve only in America for a period of three years and were obliged to take an oath of allegiance and to become naturalized subjects. Training of these men would require "Assistance of some Officers who are acquainted with their Manners and Language" and an Act of Parliament was passed to enable their appointment and facilitate the speedy raising of the regiment. The Act reiterated earlier legislation that allowed any Protestant alien residing in any of their American colonies for seven years, without being absent from that colony for more than two months to be deemed as one of "his Majesty's natural-born subjects of this kingdom." It also permitted for the first time, the commissioning into the British Army of a number of foreign-born officers, in this instance not to exceed fifty in the regiment.

The formation of the regiment was to strengthen the Army in anticipation of war with France, a war that was declared in Great Britain in May 1756.¹ The war was driven by Britain's competing interests with France and Spain over trade and colonies. It ended with Britain gaining the bulk of the French territory in North America; "Spanish Florida" by agreement with Spain and in exchange for control of Havana, Cuba; and some individual Caribbean islands in the West Indies. At the end of the war, the 3rd and 4th Battalions were disbanded and, having regard to hostile feelings in the American Colonies at this time, the regiment was transferred to the West Indies. There they were engaged in the conquest and annexation of the islands, the officers often acting as governors and administrators.

With the outbreak of the War of Independence in 1775, amongst its causes being the opposition of many Americans to the punitive taxes imposed by the British Parliament, the 3rd and 4th Battalions were again raised in England and dispatched firstly to the West Indies and then to Florida. There they formed part of an army under General Augustine Provost and distinguished themselves at the Battle of Brier Creek and the subsequent Siege of Savannah where a superior force of French and Americans was held at bay and, in the final assault, suffered great loss and was defeated. The war continued for a further eight years, during which time Britain experienced a measure of victory but also of defeat, culminating in the disaster of the siege and surrender at Yorktown which effectively ended the war. The sovereignty and independence of the former American Colonies was acknowledged and enshrined in the Treaty of Paris signed on 3 September 1783.

The 1st and 2nd Battalions of the regiment were stationed in Canada until 1797 while the 3rd and 4th, having again been disbanded at the end of the Revolutionary War, were once more raised in 1788 and sent to the West Indies. There they were engaged in the conquest and re-conquest of the islands of Martinique, Saint Lucia, Guadeloupe, St Vincent and Trinidad. By the turn of the century a further two battalions had been raised in the Isle of Wight followed by two more in 1813.² They were armed with rifles and this marked the beginning of the gradual evolution of the 60th Royal Americans into the King's Royal Rifle Corps.³ The enlarged regiment was engaged in the actions of the Peninsular War until its conclusion in 1824, when it was once again reduced to two battalions. On 4 June, the regiment dropped its title of "Royal Americans" when King George IV granted it the name of "The Duke of York's Own Rifle Corps" after its Colonel-in-Chief for many years. With the death of H.R.H. The Duke of York in 1827, however, the title of the regiment was again changed, in 1830, by William IV, to the "King's Royal Rifle Corps".

Following the Peninsular War, the 1800's were to see battalions of the regiment in action in India, South Africa, China and Afghanistan. The 1st Battalion was present during the Indian Mutiny and at the forefront of the action at the siege of Delhi, where eight of its members were awarded the Victoria Cross for gallant conduct. The regiment was strongly represented in South Africa during the Second South African War with as many as six battalions taking part in actions there. Of particular interest was the raising of Mounted Infantry leading to the formation of a complete battalion of these troops with contributions from the 1st 3rd and 4th Battalions.⁴ This was probably inspired by the effectiveness of the Boer "Kommando" a light, mobile force of mounted men able to harass their enemy by employing 'hit and run' tactics. In the period following the end of the South African War, the four regular battalions were employed at home and abroad and engaged in maintaining their high standard of training and discipline which was to stand them in good stead in the European War declared in 1914.

At the outbreak of war in August 1914, the regiment provided their four regular battalions and thirteen newly raised, active battalions of the New Army for service in the various theatres. The 1st and 2nd Battalions travelled to France immediately upon the commencement of hostilities and were

¹ The Seven Years' War.

² *A regimental chronicle and list of officers of the 60th, or the King's Royal Army Corps, formerly the 62nd, or the Royal American Regiment of Foot*, by Nesbit Willoughby Wallace.

³ *A brief History of the King's Royal Rifle Corps, 1755 to 1915* by Sir Edward Hutton.

⁴ The King's Royal Rifle Corps Association – History.



King's Royal Rifle Corps parading in High Street, Amersham - Photo courtesy: Amersham Museum

quickly in action and under fire. They were soon followed by the 3rd and 4th Battalions, rapidly transported from their base in India but, ill-equipped to face the rigours of a European winter, their men suffered severely from frost-bite, trench-foot and dysentery. After seeing action in the Ypres Salient, the 3rd and 4th Battalions were ordered to Salonika in the autumn of 1915 as part of the Salonika Expeditionary Force, part of the allied effort to aid Serbia. None of our Amersham soldiers were members of the regular battalions, but joined the battalions of the New Armies. Only those battalions will be described here.

KRRC Battalions of the New Armies⁵

Following periods of training, the New Army battalions were dispatched to France throughout 1915 and 1916 and their soldiers were to distinguish themselves in the actions in which they took part.

8th (Service) Battalion was raised at Winchester on 21 August 1914 as part of K1 and joined the 41st Brigade, 14th (Light) Division. After training at Grayshott and Aldershot they proceeded to France, landing at Boulogne on 19 May 1915. They fought in the Action of Hooze, being the first division to be attacked by flamethrowers. They were in action at the Second Attack on **Bellewaarde**. In 1916, they were in the **Somme** seeing action in The Battles of **Delville Wood** and **Flers-Courcelette**. In 1917 they fought in the German retreat to the Hindenberg Line, **The First and Third Battles of the Scarpe** at Arras, the **Battles of Langemarck and Passchendaele**. On 2 February 1918 they transferred to the 43rd Brigade. In 1918 they returned to the Somme and were involved in the **Battle of St Quentin** and the **Battle of the Avre**, suffering heavy casualties. The battalion was eventually disbanded on 3 August 1918. **William Henry North** was the only Amersham soldier to die whilst fighting with the 8th Battalion. He was killed on 3 July 1915.

13th (Service) Battalion was formed at Winchester on 7 October 1914 as part of K3 and attached as Army Troops to the 21st Division. They trained at Halton Park, Wendover, Buckinghamshire, moving into winter billets on 14 November at Amersham (A & B Coys) and Great Missenden (C & D

⁵ Much of the information on the battalions was taken from the War Time Memories Project www.wartimememoriesproject.com/greatwar

Coys). A number of Amersham men joined the battalion. In April 1915 the battalion moved to Windmill camp on Salisbury Plain and transferred to 111th Brigade, 37th Division. They proceeded to France on 31 July, landing at Boulogne, and marched across France to go into the reserves for the British assault on Loos on 26 September where they suffered heavy casualties. In 1916 they were in action in the **Battles of the Somme**, including the **Battle of Morval**, in which the division captured Geudecourt. In 1917 the battalion was in action during the German retreat to the Hindenberg Line and **The Arras Offensive**, **The Third Battle of Ypres** and the **Cambrai Operations**. In 1918 they fought on the Somme, then moved north and were in action in the **Battles of the Lys and Aisne** and the Final Advance in Picardy. At the Armistice, the division were around Berlaimont. In mid-December they moved to Amiens, where demobilisation began.

Three of our Amersham soldiers were killed while serving with the 13th Battalion: **Albert George Lane** was killed on 6 August 1916; **Thomas Edward Greenley** died on 5 August 1916 and **William George Cox** died on 29 July 1917.

16th (Service) Battalion (Church Lads Brigade) was raised at Denham, Bucks on 19 September 1914 by Field-Marshal Lord Grenfell, Commandant of the Church Lads Brigade, from current and former members of the organisation. They initially trained near to home then moved to Rayleigh in March, returning to Denham in May. They joined the 100th Brigade, 33rd Division at Clipstone Camp in June 1915 and went to Perham Down for final training in August. They proceeded to France and landed at Le Havre on 17 November. The 33rd Division concentrated near Morbecque. In 1916 they were involved in the **Battles of the Somme** and in 1917 they took part in the **Arras Offensive**, the actions on the **Hindenberg Line**, the Operations on the Flanders coast and the **Third Battle of Ypres**. In 1918 the battalion was in action in the **Battle of the Lys** and the **Final Advance** in Picardy. During their period of rest in the Sambre Valley the Armistice was signed. **Raymond Bowler** died while serving with the 16th Battalion on 2 December 1917.

17th (Service) Battalion (British Empire League) was raised in London on 16 May 1915 by the British Empire League. After the usual period of training, they joined the 117th Brigade, 39th Division in July. They proceeded to France on 8 March 1916, landing at Le Havre. The brigade concentrated near Blaringhem. On 30 June they took part in an attack at Richebourg-l'Avoué. They were in action during the **Battles of the Somme** including the fighting on the **Ancre**, The Battles of **Thiepval Ridge**, **Ancre Heights** and the capture of the **Schwaben Redoubt**. In 1917 the battalion fought in the **Battles of Pilkem Ridge**, **Langemarck**, **Menin Road Ridge**, **Polygon Wood** and the **Second Battle of Passchendaele**. In 1918 they were in action in the **Battles of St Quentin and Bapaume** in France, before moving to Flanders to take part in the **Battle of Wytschaete Ridge** and the **Second Battle of Kemel**. The Division had suffered heavy losses and was reduced to cadre strength on 16 May. They helped to instruct newly arrived American troops. **Thomas Henry Lacey** was the only Amersham soldier to be killed while serving with the 17th Btn KRRC. He died on 4 September 1916 near Beaumont Hamel.

18th (Service) Battalion (Arts & Crafts) was raised at Gidea Park in London on 4 June 1915 by Major Sir Herbert Raphael. They joined the 122nd Brigade, 41st Division at Whitley in October. After the usual period of training the battalion proceeded to France on 3 May 1916 and arrived at Le Havre, the Division concentrating between Hazebroek and Bailleul. In 1916 they were involved in the Battle of **Flers-Courcelette** and The battle of **Transloy Ridges** on the Somme. In 1917 they fought in the Battle of **Messines**, Battle of **Pilkem Ridge** among others. After a period fighting in Italy, the battalion returned to France by train to Mondecourt. They were involved in fighting at the Battles of **St Quentin**, **Bapaume** and **Arras** before moving to Flanders for the **Battle of the Lys**. They were in action during the Final Advance in Flanders. **William Stronnell** died on 28 March 1918 while serving with the 18th Battalion KRRC.