

# **William James Barnes<sup>1</sup>**

## **Sapper 2381, 9<sup>th</sup> Field Company, Royal Engineers**

**William James Barnes** was born in Amersham and baptised on 19 August 1877<sup>2</sup>. His parents were Thomas Miller Barnes, who was born in Blakesley, Northamptonshire and Elizabeth Jane Archer who came from Dunton, a small village north of Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire. They were married in the summer of 1861 at St George in the East which was then in the county of Middlesex.

Thomas gave his profession as a journeyman joiner, carpenter or builder in the various Census returns and this was probably why the family moved around, living first at Monks Risborough, where four of their children were born, then briefly in Amersham where William was born and later in Chalfont St Peter where their last child was born.

In the 1891 Census the family were living in Chalfont St Giles, most of the children had left home and William and his younger brother Frederick were still at school. John Barnes, Thomas's father, a retired journeyman carpenter, was also living with them.

William did not follow his father and grandfather into carpentry as the 1911 Census shows his profession as surveyor in the Royal Engineers, Ordnance Survey. He was living with his wife Kathleen and one- year-old daughter, Ellen Betty, at 70 Cricklewood Lane, Hendon. Kathleen was the daughter of Thomas Power, a farmer, and Kathleen gave her birthplace as Touraneena, County Waterford, Ireland. William and Kathleen were married on 17 January 1905 in St. Patrick's Church in the city of Waterford. On the Census return William states that they had two children, both living, but their other child is not listed on the Census return.

The task of the Royal Engineers was to design and construct things needed by the Army. Occasionally they were required to demolish structures that were in the way. In the main, they were skilled men – builders, carpenters, metal workers, draughtsmen, surveyors, electricians, telephone engineers – and they were also responsible for the removal of explosive booby traps and mines. William's knowledge of surveying was quite appropriate to the job his company was required to do in France and Flanders. Much of the survey work had to be performed at night as they were very exposed to the enemy.

The *War Diary* of the 9 Field Company Royal Engineers is not specific about individuals but describes the general objectives in the area. At the end of April 1915 William's company was based at Potijze, east of Ypres, marking out where trenches had to be dug by working parties.

On 1 May 1915, after the carpenters had shored and braced the trenches they were made splinter-proof, usually with a timber roof and a turf cover. Since these defences were not complete they were an ideal target for enemy artillery and the men were heavily shelled during the afternoon and night. They returned on 2 May to Potijze Wood at 4am and did reconnaissance for a second-line trench by day to be dug by working parties at night. Again they were heavily shelled all afternoon.

On 3 May the company bivouacked one mile east of Hooze in a wood. Here they constructed splinter-proof dugouts, demolished ruined buildings and laid mines. Then they marched via the canal south of Ypres to the north-west of Vlamertinghe, being shelled all the way. During this time, the men were very vulnerable and William was killed some time on 3 May 1915<sup>3</sup>, aged 38.

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<sup>1</sup> On the Amersham War Memorial initials given as MJ; all other information shows WJ

<sup>2</sup> Family Search England, Births and Christenings 1538–1975

<sup>3</sup> *War Diary 9 Field Company Royal Engineers*, The National Archives, Kew Ref. WO 95/1469/2

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

William James Barnes is remembered with Honour  
Special Memorial near Great Cross  
Potijze Chateau Grounds Cemetery, Ieper (Ypres), Belgium

He is also remembered on the Roll of Honour in St Mary's Church, Amersham.



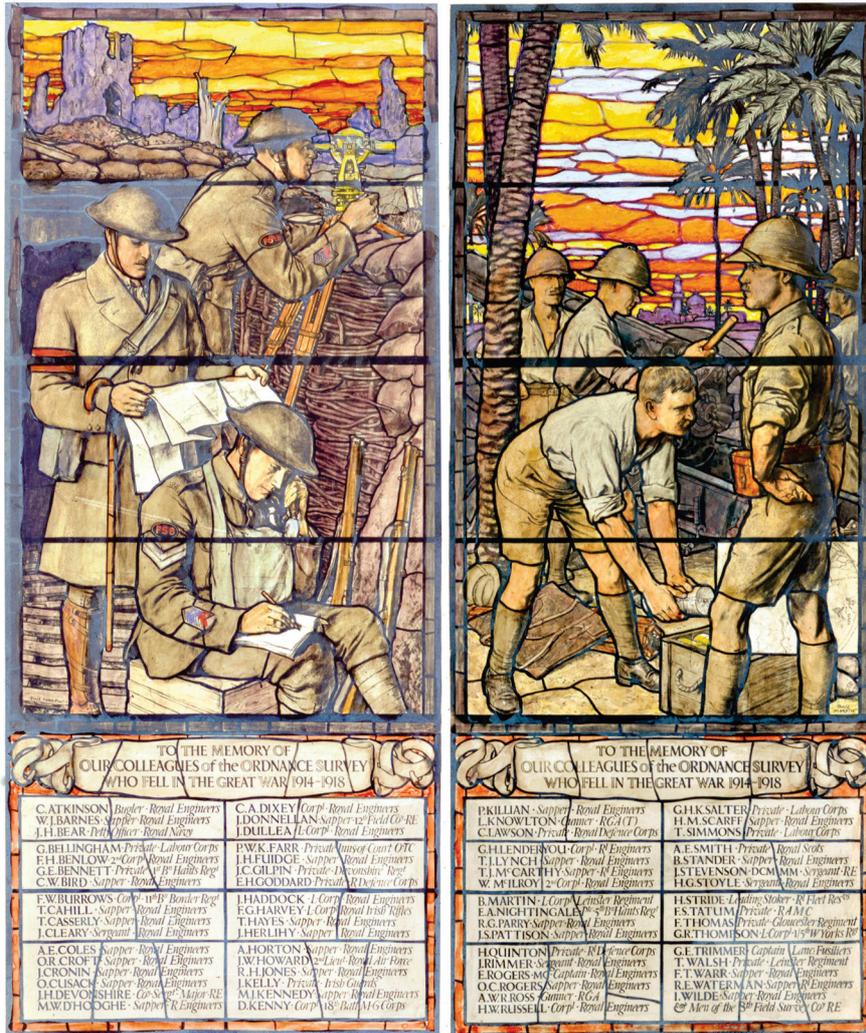
"Ieper: Potijze Chateau Grounds Cemetery Cross  
Decoodt, Hannelore, 28-04-2005, ©Vlaamse Gemeenschap"



Photograph courtesy: British War Graves

ADDENDUM

The War Diary entry of 9th Field Company, Royal Engineers for the period 1-3 May 1915 records their activities at Potijze Wood, 2 miles NE of Ypres: "Improving splinter proof dug outs all morning. Very heavily shelled by 3", 5.9" & 8.2" guns & howitzers all the afternoon. One 8.2" shell struck a dug out & all inside were killed or badly wounded." This was undoubtedly the incident in which William James Barnes died along with four of his colleagues. Their deaths "on 3 May 1915", and the placing of "Special Memorials" in the Potijze Chateau Grounds Cemetery are noted in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission records.



This splendid memorial window, originally sited at the London Road, Southampton, headquarters of the Ordnance Survey, was sadly destroyed by bombing during WW2. (Photograph by courtesy of Ordnance Survey.)

William James Barnes is also remembered on the Stoneham War Shrine, North Stoneham, Eastleigh, Hants (<http://www.northstoneham.org.uk/warshrine/intro.html>) although his association with that place is unclear.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Our grateful thanks are due to Clive Boocock for making available the excellent picture of the memorial window, for his interesting comments on the incident in which William James Barnes apparently died and also for drawing our attention to the entry on the Stoneham War Shrine.