

Edward James Crook

Private 14700, 3rd Battalion, Royal Fusiliers



Photograph courtesy Hilary Brooks

Edward James Crook (known as James or Jim) was born in the Jan-March quarter of 1894 in Amersham, the sixth child of Obadiah and Alexandra Crook. Obadiah was a Prudential Assurance agent, and by 1901 the family was living in a house on the High Street, Amersham, and the oldest brother Charles had begun his working life as a stable boy. According to the 1911 Census, the house had six rooms and housed a large family. Alexandra Crook had at that time 15 children, 14 of whom were living and 8 still living at home. Another daughter, the sixteenth and last child of the couple, was born in January 1912. Edward and his siblings probably attended St Mary's School, which was close by. Edward and his brother John were both employed as domestic gardeners.

Edward joined the Army as a volunteer sometime prior to the commencement of the war. He enlisted in the Royal Fusiliers, otherwise known as the City of London Regiment, and was assigned to the 3rd Battalion. This is evidenced by a letter that he wrote to his parents on 10 September 1913 from Chakrata, India, where the 3rd Battalion was based prior to moving on to Lucknow where Edward expected to remain for about two years. In December 1914 the 3rd Battalion returned to England and was soon deployed to fight in France as part of the British Expeditionary Force arriving in Le Havre in mid-January 1915. On 2 February, the Battalion received orders to move towards the front, and 27 officers and 974 men marched out, first to Renningshels, and eventually arrived in **Ypres** at 2.00 am on the 6 February where the men were billeted in the Cavalry Barracks and were reported to be in good spirits, but tired. In the evening the battalion received orders to go to the trenches. They moved up under cover of darkness and the Commanding Officer inspected the trenches at 2.00 am and found all correct.¹

¹ *War Diaries and Intelligence Summary of the 3rd Battalion, Royal Fusiliers*, The National Archives, Kew, Ref. WO 379/29

The War Diaries give a grim and graphic picture of life and death in the trenches. On 8 Feb. 1915 the trenches were reported to be in poor condition and sandbags and planks were sent for. Every day several soldiers were being killed and wounded by snipers. Telephone communication between the trenches was poor and messengers were used instead. Casualties increased and the C.O. requested artillery help. Casualties could not be evacuated to clearing stations because of enemy action. The arrival of artillery brought some relief. Conditions in the trenches deteriorated and by 11 February many soldiers were suffering from frostbite and their rifles were hopelessly damaged in the mud. (Only 2 out of 25 were still functioning.) Men were standing up to their knees in water. On 11 February, some of the officers and men were billeted overnight in Kruistaat but had to return to duties in the trenches on 12 February. Marching progress was slow owing to the state of the men's feet. By 13 February, it was reported that some of the trenches were untenable and new trenches were constructed at between 50 and 100 yards behind the originals and were completed during the night. 14 February proved to be a disastrous day. One of the trenches was completely overrun by the enemy, and another was abandoned. There was much confusion, misinterpretation of information and many casualties. It was in this chaotic situation that Edward James Crook lost his life, aged 21 years. He was one of 156 reported missing.

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

Edward James Crook is remembered with Honour
on the Menin Gate Memorial, Ypres, panels 6 & 8

For details of the Memorial and the engraving, see the chapter on the Memorials to the Missing.

Edward's brother John also served in the army. He claimed to have been born in 1895 and attested for the Rifle Brigade in London on 9 Sept 1914, having previously worked as a footman. He joined the 8th Battalion with the number 2980 and was with the British Expeditionary Force from 20 May 1915 until being wounded. He appears to have been sent back to England, possibly for treatment, on 10 August 1915. He was also home on leave from 11 -20 Jan 1916. From the service records it appears that he joined the 2nd Northamptonshire H.S. [Home Service] Gun Battery in September 1916 and the 29th Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment on 3 Feb 1917. This was a Works battalion which was transferred to the Labour Corps in April 1917. The medal card mentions only the Rifle Brigade and the Labour Corps in which he was Private 179796. He was discharged from the army on 28 March 1919, aged 22, with a 20% disability pension of 5 shillings and sixpence resulting from a gunshot wound to the shoulder. He was entitled to The Allied Victory Medal, The British War Medal, 1914-18 and The 1914-15 Star.

Obadiah Crook was born in the first quarter of 1854 in the village of Hardwick, Buckinghamshire, just north of Aylesbury where the birth was registered. At the age of 27, he is recorded in the 1881 Census as still living in the village, at Church Precincts, with his parents Edward and Ann and his occupation is given as 'Traveller in Books'. In 1886 he married Alexandra Eugenie Bradshaw, some ten years his junior, from the neighbouring village of Weedon.

By 1891, the couple were living in the small hamlet of Woodrow in the parish of Amersham and Obadiah's occupation is described as 'Prudential Agent'. The Prudential Mutual Assurance Investment and Loan Association had been founded in London in 1848 and Obadiah's job as an Agent would probably have been as a door to door representative promoting the sale of insurance products and collecting premiums. He was listed in all the Kelly's Directories from 1895 to 1915 as being an Insurance Agent so it appears that he may have had a long career as the 'Man from the Pru'!

Obadiah Crook was an educated man and is described as having been a poet, like his father. He wrote *A Discourse to the Young*, and *Spiritual Poems in Metrical Verse* published in 1879. He died in Amersham in 1934 at the age of 80.



In the various documents relating to the Crook family in Amersham, their address is given merely as "High Street, Amersham". However, by working along the row of houses on the North side of the High Street, using the 1911 Census enumerator's notes and noting the location of the Methodist chapel and the 'Eagle' public house, number 125 High Street was identified as the correct building. The enumerator described the residence of O. Crook as a cottage. The cottage does not seem to be very big from the outside, however, in the 1911 Census it was described as having six rooms. Even so, barely large enough to house Obadiah, Alexandra and the eight of their children living at home at that time!

(The cottage at 125 High Street, Amersham, the home of the Crook family, photographed in September 2013.)

**In Memory of my Very Dear Soldier Son, Edward James Crook, Killed in Action 14th February 1915, Died in Harness Bravely for his Country.
Composed by his father, Obadiah Crook.**

Far away our dear boy lies numbered with the slain,
Marked by the foe, shot down. But suffered little pain,
And although cut off from us we have a hope within,
He is passed to Higher Nobler ranks, it is well with him.

We prayed and hoped the Lord would spare our dear boy's life,
But God in Mercy took him from the battle strife,
He willed that he should leave the field of horrid gore,
And enter that Home of Peace and rest for evermore.

Suddenly passed away from this dark world of sin,
No more to come to us, but we may go to him,
Only a little before us in advance gone on,
And soon we too perhaps may have to follow on.

No more nice welcome letters from our boy so dear,
Which truly oft us did both interest and cheer,
No stain upon his name to us doth sorrow bring,
He was a good son, a true soldier of the King.

At home last Christmas one in the family ring,
Never shall we forget so heartily did he sing,
His bass and manly voice was heard with sweeter tone,
We hoped our boy would sing again with us at home.

Sad parting when he to his mother said goodbye,
His mother felt her boy was going away to die,
He'd just come from Lucknow across the mined deep water,
Now like a lamb he seemed going to the slaughter.

While our hearts deeply feel the sad loss of our son,
Cut down in his prime at the age of twentyone,
We have a bright hope he is not gone forever,
But we shall meet him again beyond the dark river.

O. Crook 1915 ²

² Our grateful thanks are due to Hilary Brooks, the great niece of Edward James Crook, for providing us with the photograph of Edward, the text of the poem written by Obadiah Crook and information from her records enabling us to correct various errors in the original text.