

# JOHN ROBERTSHAW HILL



6th May 1917

1883-1917 Aged 33

## Second Lieutenant, 'P' Company Special Brigade Royal Engineers.

John Hill was the grandson of a former Mayor of Bradford who was also named John Hill. Born of humble parentage in Thornton, the elder John had started out as factory boy. He went into business on his own account when he was 28 and prospered, founding the worsted-making firm John Hill & Sons of Apsley Mills, Great Horton. He was a prominent citizen of Bradford, active in public life as a J.P. and Alderman, and he served as Mayor 1881-2. His son Thomas Rawson Hill helped his father run the business, and he married Sarah Jane Robertshaw, the daughter of a prominent Bradford yarn manufacturer. John Robertshaw Hill was the fourth of their nine children, but their first son. Two of his siblings died in childhood. He went to Bradford Grammar School in 1893 when he was ten, and he studied there for the next nine years. In Form Vth Classical in 1899 he came near the bottom of the class in most subjects but he was first in Natural Science. As there was no Science form at this time he moved into VIth Modern and his best results were in Physics, Geology and Chemistry. In 1902 he obtained seven Higher Certificate passes, with a distinction in Physics, and he was elected to a Science Exhibition at St. John's College, Cambridge. He had been a regular player in the First XV since the 1899-1900 season as a 'speedy centre' who was able to tackle well and also knew when to pass to his wing man. In 1901-2 he captained the team, playing alongside the future England international Steinthal. He also played for the First XI.

At Cambridge Hill achieved a First Class in the Natural Sciences Tripos, Part I. In the 'Cambridge Letter' in The Bradfordian (December 1904) it was reported 'he was still the terror of those Rigger teams which go forth to play with John's. This is in the intervals of his researches into the secrets of Nature in the Varsity Chemistry Laboratory, studies which are spoken of with bated breath and hard-held nostrils by his less learned fellows.' He graduated in 1906 with Second Class Honours, and he remained at Cambridge on a Hutchinson research Studentship in Natural Sciences, before he went to the Imperial (now the Commonwealth) Institute in London. John was a Chemical analyst. He later worked for the



Malay States government, where he completed a study on the causes and cure of the tropical disease beri-beri. In 1913 he was elected a Fellow of the Institute of Chemistry.

Hill's work was interrupted by the outbreak of war, which occurred during a six month furlough to England. He had served in the Malay State Volunteers, and he volunteered for the 1st Bradford Pals in September 1914. He was aged 31, weighed less than 10 stones and was 5 feet 7 inches tall. He continued work on his research when his training permitted and published his final paper in 1915. Then in July 1915 the Army asked for men with experience in Chemistry and Hill was transferred with several others to the Royal Engineers Special Company M. Within a week he was sent to France. All these 'chemists in spectacles', as Churchill dubbed them, were given the rank of Corporal and were required for the British Army's new chemical warfare units. They first saw action at Loos in the autumn. The Special Companies were expanded into the R.E. Special Brigade, and on 29th April 1916 Hill was promoted to Second Lieutenant. He was killed in a tragic accident near Vaulx, south of Arras, while preparing for an attack. Men from three RE Special Companies and two divisional ammunition columns were moving into position 250 Livens Projectors, simple but effective mortars which fired containers of liquid gas. Despite safety precautions, a stray shell detonated a wagon carrying the propellant charges, which in turn attracted more German artillery fire. In the resulting conflagration forty-four men from the three Gas Companies were killed, including Hill with twenty men from his 'P' Company. Their bodies were buried in Beaulencourt Cemetery, near Bapaume.





## Acknowledgements:

Hill's photo is from the School's Memorial Book, with thanks to the OBA and BGS. The foundation for this biography is his obituary in the Bradford Weekly Telegraph (read at Bradford Local Studies Library). The family history was researched using Ancestry.com, and the death notices for John Hill from findmypast.co.uk, especially Hull Daily Mail, 6th August 1909 (<http://search.findmypast.co.uk/bna/viewarticle?id=bl%2f0000324%2f19090806%2f193>). For John R Hill's school career I used the BGS Annual Reports for 1899, 1900, 1901, 1902, 1904, 1907, and The Bradfordian for 1900-1901, December 1904, July and December 1905, July 1906. For his Cambridge degree, John Venn and J.A. Venn, *The Book of Matriculations and Degrees ... at Cambridge University 1901-1912* (<[https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=V74sCQAAQBAJ&pg=PA130&lpg=PA130&dq=John+Robertshaw+Hill&source=bl&ots=bmF2F5ampL&sig=Sz\\_JJP1TDD3Otw22sL1cS0Q\\_fFg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiO942Uv9TTAhUqB8AKHWymCnA4ChDoAQhFMAo#v=onepage&q=John%20Robertshaw%20Hill&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=V74sCQAAQBAJ&pg=PA130&lpg=PA130&dq=John+Robertshaw+Hill&source=bl&ots=bmF2F5ampL&sig=Sz_JJP1TDD3Otw22sL1cS0Q_fFg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiO942Uv9TTAhUqB8AKHWymCnA4ChDoAQhFMAo#v=onepage&q=John%20Robertshaw%20Hill&f=false)>, 130.

Hill's number in the the 16th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment was 16/473 (from his Officer Personal Record, WO339-61662, and the Medal Award Roll) (<<http://bradfordpals1914-1918.co.uk/16-bn-info-surnames-h>> does not have this, while <<http://search.findmypast.co.uk/record?id=gbm%2fbrad-pals%2f1410>> wrongly identifies him with 15/1524 Private John R. Hill, West Yorkshire Regiment).

For the R.E. Special Brigades in general, and for Hill's death in particular, I am indebted to Tricia Platts who tracked down Terry Reeves' transcription of Lieutenant Bansall's account of the incident in The National Archives (WO95/486). This, with much more fascinating detail will be found at <<http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/index.php?/topic/547-royal-engineers-special-brigade/&page=20>>, also <<http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/index.php?/topic/159338-special-brigade-re/>>. Tricia also generously shared her knowledge of George Oswald Mitchell's account of his service in the gas companies, as told to his son Jeremy Mitchell, published as *Shells and Whizzbangs* (The Memoir Club, 2008).

John was remembered on his family gravestone in Nab Wood Cemetery (<[http://www.iwm.org.uk\\_www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/item/memorial/5249](http://www.iwm.org.uk_www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/item/memorial/5249)>, <[http://warmemorials.myfastforum.org/archive/nab-wood-cemetery-1914-1926\\_\\_o\\_t\\_t\\_3924.html](http://warmemorials.myfastforum.org/archive/nab-wood-cemetery-1914-1926__o_t_t_3924.html)> (bottom photo) (accessed 4-5-2017).

This biography was researched and composed by Nick Hooper (Nhooper1956@googlemail.com), with acknowledgement to the work of Terry Reeves and Tricia Platts, May 2017.

The photos below of Livens Projectors at Hill 62 Sanctuary Wood Museum, Ieper, Belgium, are from the author's collection. It is also possible to see exploded sausage-shaped projectiles there.

