

# JOHN AYRTON



29th April 1917

1896-1917 Aged 20

## Second Lieutenant, 1st Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment.

John Ayrton was the younger of the two sons of Alfred Ayrton and Harriett Charlesworth Porritt. Alfred, originally from Brighouse, became a prominent citizen of Bradford, a leading figure in the worsted industry, a city councillor and the first President of Bradford City FC. Alfred was the second of eight children. His father was a solicitor, however after leaving school he was apprenticed to a wool buyer ('stapler'). His marriage in 1897 to Harriett, the daughter of an engine driver on the Midland Railway, did not impede his rise. He was a partner in the firm of Ayrton & Co., Wool Merchants and Top-makers, of Westbrook Mills, Shearbridge Road, until his retirement in 1913. In 1899 he was brought onto the committee of Manningham FC, a declining Northern Union rugby club, to control its finances and restore its fortunes. His solution was to convert the club to Association Football, and so Bradford City FC was born in 1903. After he stepped down as club president he went into politics as a Unionist councillor for Heaton ward, and his standing in the city was recognized by his chairmanship of both the Bradford Wool and Noil Association and the Bradford Boy Scouts Association.

John was born on 27th November 1896, eight years after his only brother George. John attended Bradford Grammar School from September 1906 until July 1912 on the Modern side of the school, for boys intended for commercial careers. He was awarded the Form Prize for Third Modern Upper in 1910, and was runner-up on three more occasions. He left when he was fifteen to go into the wool trade as a wool merchant, presumably with his father's business. Whether he was a sportsman we do not know, however he did learn to ride, perhaps an indication of the social ambitions of his family.

When war began John was still only seventeen, and Alfred later recalled that 'lots of boys at the Grammar rushed to enlist and went directly from school, along Manningham Lane and into Belle Vue Barracks to join the West Yorkshire Regiment.' This refers to the Territorial 6th Battalion, but Alfred's memory was deceptive for John had already left BGS. Many former pupils did join the Old Bradfordians company of the 6th, however John served in 'A' Company. It is noteworthy that Alfred was active in promoting the Bradford Pals, making a rousing speech during half-time at the first Football League derby between



Bradford City and Bradford Park Avenue on 23rd October. The 29,000 crowd responded by throwing money and cigarettes onto the pitch for the soldiers.

John was considered sufficiently trained to proceed overseas with the 1/6th battalion on 15th April 1915, and it was in the trenches near Turco Farm, north of Ypres, that he was shot 'through the fleshy part of the shoulder' on 26th July. Although Sergeant Hanby made light of the wound in a letter, it was a severe injury. John was kept at the Field Ambulance for three days before transfer to a Casualty Clearing Station, which indicates that his death may have been expected. If so, when he defied expectations he was then evacuated by train and ship to England. He was passed fit again on 22nd March 1916, however he remained at Clipstone Camp while his application for a commission was processed. He requested to be posted to the 20/West Yorkshire, a training battalion, and it is possible that his father was involved in trying to delay him from being sent back to the front. In November John finally proceeded to No. 3 Officer Cadet Battalion at Bristol for a four month course which included training in anti-gas measures, trench to trench attacks, field engineering, interior economy, military law, map-reading, reconnaissance, musketry and bombing. Many of those on these courses were like him former private soldiers and NCOs with front-line experience. He was commissioned on 28th February 1917, and two months later he joined the 1/ West Yorkshire near Loos in France as part of a draft of eight Second Lieutenants. Alas, his service with them was short lived. After 48 hours at the front he was shot in the head, and he died the following day in 33 Casualty Clearing Station. He was buried in Bethune Town Cemetery.



## Acknowledgements:

John's photo is from the memorial book presented to BGS by the Old Boys Association, with thanks to both. With some delving the family history can be constructed using Ancestry. Alfred and his eldest son George were absent when the census was taken in 1911 as they were returning from a world tour via Japan and the USA. I have not been able to trace the whereabouts of Harriet and her daughter Alice, born in 1904. Meanwhile, John was left at home with a female servant. His school record comes from the BGS Annual Reports for 1907-1912.

For Alfred's business, <[www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/28771/page/7798/data.pdf](http://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/28771/page/7798/data.pdf)>, <<http://www.woolmark.com/knowledge/manufacturing/worsted-system/topmaking/>> (accessed 12-4-2017). For Alfred and Bradford City, I used <<http://manningham.church/wp/history/>>, <<https://widthofapost.com/2014/09/10/bradford-city-and-remembering-the-great-war/>> (accessed 12-4-2017) and John Dewhirst, *Life at the Top*, (bantamspast, Cleckheaton, no date), particularly 90-9, 261; Allan Hillary et al., *Listen To Our Stories. Remembering World War One at Undercliffe Cemetery Bradford* (privately published, 1914) 16-17 (also at <[http://www.undercliffecemetery.co.uk/WW1\\_Booklet.pdf](http://www.undercliffecemetery.co.uk/WW1_Booklet.pdf)>. The latter contains an incomplete account of John's life and service, and I quoted Alfred's memories of recruiting from it. His 1915 wound and death were reported in the *Bradford Weekly Telegraph* 6-8-1915 and 4-5-1917 respectively. Crucial for understanding his military career is his file in the National Archives, WO339-76885. David Whithorn drew my attention to the fact that John was at the 1/3 Field Ambulance for 3 days before he was evacuated. He may have been placed among the 'moribund', those expected not to survive or too badly wounded to be moved. David also suggested Alfred's involvement in trying to keep his younger son from the front—the recommendation for a commission was signed by Colonel G. Muller, an Old Bradfordian who had formerly commanded the 1st Bradford Pals and who must have been known to Alfred. This is a speculation, but see below for his elder son.

For Officer Training Battalions, I used C Moore-Bick, *Playing the Game. The British Junior Officer on the Western Front 1914-1918* (Helion & Co, Solihull, 2016 corrected paperback ed.), 53-4, 67, 73, 78. I am also very fortunate to have been given access by Michael Berry OB to the notebook kept by his grandfather Second Lieutenant Harry Hartley while on an Officer Training course during 1917. John's final days in France are recorded in the War Diary of the 1/West Yorkshire. I am indebted to David Whithorn for sending me extracts from this document.

During the war George A W Ayrton avoided service and was a 'Colonial wool buyer', according to his 1918 marriage record. His father was an official with the War Department Wool Section, probably at the Wool Control Board established in 1916 at the Great Northern Railway's Victoria Hotel, Bradford (M Woods and T Platts eds., *Bradford in the Great War* (Sutton Publishing, Stroud, 1907), 90-91. The family downsized from 7 Selbourne Grove to 37, Blenheim Road. Alfred died when he was struck by a bus in the blackout in 1939 in Morecambe, whence he had retired. Although the family had been strongly Wesleyan-Methodist, his funeral was held at St Barnabas, Manningham.

This biography was compiled and composed by Nick Hooper (Nhooper1956@googlemail.com) in April 2017, with acknowledgement to the work of those identified above.