

ARTHUR DOUGLAS WOODCOCK

1883-1917 Aged 37



16th August 1917



Second Lieutenant, 10th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment, attached 2nd Battalion.

Arthur Woodcock was a keen golfer, an early scout-master, and under the stage name of 'Dudley Woodcock' he toured with a light opera company on the eve of the outbreak of war. His parents were Charles Varey Woodcock, a Bradford accountant, and Kate Elizabeth Walton, the daughter of a manufacturer of worsted dress goods from Skipton. After their marriage in 1881, the birth of their daughter Ida was followed by Arthur in 1883. Two further sons died in infancy. Charles was a successful insurance and estate agent and accountant with premises in the centre of Bradford. He was active in fund-raising and charitable work, and he succeeded his father as honorary secretary of the Royal Eye and Ear and the Children's Hospital in Bradford. He was also a Freemason. Evidence for Charles's growing prosperity is seen from the family residences: until the mid-1890s they lived in Manningham, then moved to Hipperholme, next to Menston and finally to Ben Rhydding.

Arthur attended Hipperholme Grammar School until he was fifteen, and then went to Bradford Grammar School for a single year, 1898-1899. It was not a successful year academically as he was near the bottom of 1st Form Modern in the Senior School in all subjects. When he left school he became a clerk to a worsted cloth merchant. Arthur had several interests. He was one of the first members of Otley Golf Club and a reasonable golfer. At the start of 1909 he founded the Menston Fairfax Troop of the Boy Scouts and was their first scout-master, although he gave up the position after a year to pursue his vocation to perform on the stage. Arthur had a fine baritone voice and featured in a 1904 production by Bradford Amateur Operatic Society as well as in a production of 'Robin Hood' at the 1907 Menston Gala. In 1910 he moved to London and became a professional, touring with the Beecham and Quinlan Opera Company. Later he spent a summer with the 'Peek-a-Boos' at Bognor Kursaal Theatre and performed with 'The Fragments'. He toured in Australia in 1912, and he was still performing in Bradford in October 1914.

When Arthur enlisted in the Bradford Territorials' 'Grammar School Company', the Reserve (2/6th) Battalion, is not known. He soon applied for a

commission, which was granted in the Leeds' Pals (15th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment) in April 1915. Owing to confusion in his file, precision about his war record is not possible. He first served overseas with the 10/West Yorkshire, and on 23rd April 1917 was wounded by a shell splinter in an advance in the teeth of a 'hurricane barrage' near Arras, one of thirteen officer casualties. After convalescing in hospital in Manchester, he returned to France on 10th July and was posted to the 2nd Battalion near Ypres.

On 31st July, the start of the Third Battle of Ypres, the 2/West Yorkshire took part in 8th Division's advance east from Hooge towards the Gheluvelt Plateau. After initial success, heavy enfilade machine-gun fire forced the battalion back to the Westhoek Ridge. Casualties totalled 220. Woodcock and the survivors spent a fortnight in camp before returning to the Westhoek Ridge in the early hours of 16th August. In the dark and featureless landscape they had to make their way to the tapes marking their start-line by compass bearing. At 4.45 a.m. 400 men advanced, almost reaching their final objective, the 'Green-line ridge'; but the failure of attacks on the flanks again exposed them to heavy enfilade fire, and strong counter-attacks from around 9 a.m. forced the remnant back. When relieved at 11 p.m. the battalion had lost all ten officers and 264 men. Woodcock was reported missing in action. His father requested the War Office to delay publishing his name while his wife recovered from a serious operation. The family clung to his Colonel's words that 'there is a strong possibility that he may be a prisoner in German hands', and Charles requested news of his son. The Red Cross enquiry reported negative on 29th September, and hope was extinguished in early November when 1st ANZAC Division reported burying Arthur's body 'north-east of Ypres', although it gave no precise location. Consequently his name is one of nearly 35,000 missing killed from 16th August 1917 onwards on the Tyne Cot Memorial. His name is also on the Ben Rhydding Church and Ilkley War Memorials.



Acknowledgements:

For researching the Woodcock family, I used Ancestry.com. Arthur's year at B.G.S. is recorded in the Annual Report for 1899. The newspaper search facility on findmypast.co.uk was indispensable for Arthur's activities, although the reference in the *Bradford Weekly Telegraph* report of 4.5.1917 to Arthur's wound came from the Bradford Local Studies Library First World War Casualty index.

Arthur was gazetted 2nd Lieut. on 3rd April 1915 (<<https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/29165/page/4780/data.pdf>>). His Officer Personal File is in The National Archives WO 339-29663. However, the two 'Casualty Forms—Active Service' which were included are for 2nd Lieutenant A.T. Woodcock, East Yorkshire Regiment. Other correspondence in the file reveals that Arthur Woodcock served with the 2nd Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment after he returned from convalescence, although the C.W.G.C. lists him as serving only with 10th Battalion. The War Diaries for the 10th and 2nd Battalions are both available through Ancestry.com, from which the details are taken. 2/Lieut. A.D. Woodcock is recorded as missing at the end of the entry for 16th August in the latter. His father's correspondence with the War Office is in his file, as is the burial report. Arthur's transfer to the 2nd Battalion was so recent that even the W.O. was uncertain. Woodcock's Medal Index Card, on the other hand, records 10th July 1917 as his first entry into a theatre of war. The 10th Battalion War Diary does not seem to note when he joined, and did not name the 23rd April officer casualties. *The Bradfordian* reported in November 1917 that Woodcock, reported missing in August, was now believed dead. My thanks to Tricia Platts and Edward Wild for drawing to my attention the ICRC enquiry, and the latter for the information about the move to London and Ben Rhydding Church. In the 1911 Census he gave his name as 'Douglas Woodcock, vocalist', and on the memorial he was listed as Douglas Arthur Woodcock.

For the 8th Division's actions on 31st July and 16th August, I also made use of Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Passchendaele. The Untold Story* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1996), 92-3, 103; and Peter Barton, *Passchendaele. Unseen panoramas of the Third Battle of Ypres* (Constable, London, in association with the I.W.M., 2007), the maps on 172 and 224.

This biography was researched and composed by Nick Hooper (Nhooper1956@googlemail.com) in August 2018. The photo is the author's.