

JAMES ARTHUR FIRTH



5th June 1917

1893-1917 Aged 24

Gunner 781447, 'A' Battery 311th Brigade Royal Field Artillery.

James Firth was born in the Dirk Hill area of Great Horton on 16th March 1893. His parents were Henry Spurr Firth and Mary Ellen (nee Gill). Henry's family came from Horbury near Wakefield where his father was a cordwainer (that is, he made new shoes). Henry worked with him before moving to Bradford in the 1860s, where for more than thirty years he worked as a wool-carding machine overlooker. He married Mary Ellen Gill, a worsted weaver, in 1871. Her father and both grandfathers were all wool-combers, which may explain how she and Henry met. Over the next twenty years Henry and Mary had eleven children, of whom eight survived. James was the youngest, and the fifth son. He was the only one to go to Bradford Grammar School, where he was a pupil from 1905 to 1908. He showed promise in Forms Third and Fourth Modern, and at the end of his first year he was runner-up for the both the form and the first year boys' prizes. In his third and final year his achievements declined, and he left school aged fifteen to work as a clerk for Messrs. Kessler and Co., a wool importer with two warehouses in Little Germany.

James was twenty-one and living with his parents at St Margaret's Place in Horton when the war began. He did not volunteer until the fighting had been going on for more than a year. When he did enlist in October 1915 the Government had begun to move towards compelling men to fight through the Derby Scheme, so he may have decided to go while he still had a say in the matter. His choice fell on the Royal Field Artillery, perhaps as a way of avoiding the trenches. He enlisted in the Territorial Force 2/2nd West Riding Brigade based at Valley Parade in Bradford. In 1916 it was renamed 311th Brigade. It was part of 62nd West Riding Division's artillery support, and in early January 1917 the whole division crossed to France. At the end of January 311th Brigade became an Army Field Artillery Brigade and over the following months it supplemented the artillery of divisions from several different Corps which were making attacks.



Firth embarked for France on 6th January 1917. On 15th February he was admitted to a Field Ambulance suffering from a high temperature, a condition which was known as 'trench fever' - he returned to service four days later. He served with 'A' Battery which was equipped with six of the principal British field piece, the 18 pounder Quick Firing gun. From the start of April 1917, Firth's battery was almost constantly in action, firstly supporting the opening phase of the Battle of Arras north of the River Scarpe, and subsequently attacks on Gavrelle and Oppy. It was not until 19th May that they were withdrawn and were able to rest to some extent as they moved northwards by road to Nieppe, close to the Belgian frontier. There they took up battery positions in support of the New Zealand Division. The Brigade War Diary reports on 5th June, 'Very heavy shelling of battery position by enemy.' Although it reports no casualty figures, this must have been what caused Firth's death. He was one of five men from 311th Brigade killed on the same day and who were buried in Strand Military Cemetery, near Ploegsteert. At least two of his brothers also served during the war. They both survived.



Acknowledgements:

The photo is from the School memorial book, with thanks to B.G.S. and the O.B.A. The family history was researched using Ancestry.com. Firth's school record is from the B.G.S. Annual Reports 1906, 1907, 1908. Firth's death was noticed in the Bradford Weekly Telegraph 3-8-1917. Kelly's 1912 Bradford Directory lists Kessler & Co. as 'Merchants in stuff & wove, tops, noils, waste &c.' For Kessler's warehouses in Little Germany, see <<http://www.bradfordhistorical.org.uk/building.html>>, accessed 31-5-2017.

The war service of James and his brothers Albert and Walter (who shared a house at 147 Bolton Road) is recorded in the Bradford Roll of Honour (<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/bradfordww1/10291049094/in/album-72157636583154114/>>).

The record of Firth's hospitalisation was found at <<http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/index.php?/topic/174241-gunner-james-arthur-firth/>>. For 311th Brigade R.F.A., <<http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/index.php?/topic/115963-311th-brigade-rfa/>> (both accessed 22-5-2017). I consulted the transcript of the brigade War Diary held in the Peter Liddle Collection, Leeds University Library, Bradford Volunteer Artillery, Classmark LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0181, file 'War Diaries of the 2/2nd West Riding Brigade, later 311th Brigade RFA (Royal Field Artillery) Territorial Force (1914-1918)', folio 33. This clearly states that the brigade had joined II ANZAC Corps. For the 311th Brigade casualties of 5th June, see <<http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead.aspx?cpage=1&sort=name&order=asc>> accessed 31-5-2017.

This biography was researched and composed by Nick Hooper (Nhooper1956@googlemail.com) in May and June 2017.