

ALFRED PEEL



5th May 1917

1895-1917 Aged 22

Second Lieutenant 6th (Service) Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment.

Alfred was the second son of John Edward Peel (known as Edward) who lived in Addingham, although he was born in Lancashire in 1862. He gave up an apprenticeship as a cabinet maker to train as a Wesleyan minister and he was ordained in 1888. His duties would require him to move regularly and widely. His first appointment was in Guyana, in South America. He married Laura Jessie Hill in Bradford in 1892. Two sons, Edward Percy and Alfred, were born to the couple while Edward was minister at Lune Street Chapel, Preston. Laura died in 1898, and in 1900 Edward married a second time, to Catherine Mann from London. The couple had two further sons.

Alfred's first secondary school was Kingswood, Bath, which was founded to educate the sons of Methodist clergy. He studied there until his father was posted to Shipley, and subsequently to the Hunslet Circuit in Leeds. Alfred entered Bradford Grammar School in the Remove Classical Form in September 1910. Judging by his achievements, he was possibly the most talented Classicist at Bradford in the years leading up to the First World War. In 1913 and 1914 he came first in Sixth Classical in Latin, Greek, Divinity, English, and Greek and Roman History; in 1914 he took the Forster History Prize and the prizes for Classics, Latin composition and English; he was also nominated for Greek composition, Latin and Greek verse, and Ancient History, but these prizes were awarded to the second choices to spread the honours. He also gained distinctions in four Higher Certificate subjects. Alfred left no impression as a sportsman, but he made a deep impression as a debater and he won the Society Cup in 1914. In December 1913 he came first in the Scholarship Exam for Corpus Christi College and he went up to Oxford in Autumn 1914.

By then the world war had broken out. Alfred was a keen member of the university OTC which he joined immediately. He completed his first year's studies, then in the 1915 summer vacation he enlisted and in August was commissioned into the Royal Berkshire Regiment (his father had by this time moved to Newbury, Berkshire). Alfred went to France with the 6th Battalion in May 1916 and he fought in the early part of the Somme battle, when his battalion successfully took their objectives at Montauban. During the continuing severe fighting he was the only officer left in his company, and subsequently his



health broke down owing to 'trench fever'. He was invalided home to England where he recuperated at Somerville College, Oxford. It must have been a pleasant reminder of his former life. Peel returned to his battalion in France in January 1917 and was appointed the battalion bombing officer and later intelligence officer. The 6/Royal Berkshire were still fighting on the Somme battlefield, where operations continued throughout the winter to improve the British positions for future operations. After participation in the successful capture of Grandcourt on 17th February, the battalion earned a prolonged spell away from the line.

At the end of April 18th Division, to which the battalion belonged, moved to the front near Arras for the impending attack on 3rd May. The 6/Royal Berkshire were in support for that operation, then in the early hours of the 5th they took over the front line near Cherisy. The Battalion War Diary describes that day as a quiet one—the only event noted was the death of Second Lieutenant Peel by shell fire at 3pm while in the support trench. His body was taken for burial to London Cemetery, Neuville Vitasse. Corpus noted in its record of Peel's death that 'he was undoubtedly a man of more than ordinary ability and character. A true Yorkshireman [sic] in type, if he was somewhat reserved in character, he yet possessed remarkable qualities of strength and judgement, which must have developed during his career at Oxford to bring distinction both upon himself and upon the College.' His brother, who did not attend BGS, served with the R.F.A. and survived the war.



Acknowledgements:

Alfred's photo is from the Memorial Book, with thanks to the OBA and BGS. Much of the family history was traced through Ancestry.com. The Methodist records for John Edward Peel are fragmentary, but for the early part of his career, see <https://archive.org/stream/alphabeticalarra00hilliala/alphabeticalarra00hilliala_djvu.txt>. Alfred's academic career is taken from the BGS Annual Reports for 1911, 1912, 1913 and 1914. Some idea of his debating style is found in *The Bradfordian*: 'With downcast looks and modest demeanour he reasoned with the house as with an erring child' (July 1913, vol. xviii, No.116, 22); 'Not marred by verbosity, the speech of the honourable member was short and sweet' (November 1913, No.117, 17); 'A truly ponderous essay ... a speech, in more than one sense full of weight, and which made an increasingly deep impression upon the house' (March 1914, No.118, 15).

For his year at Oxford, Corpus Christi Roll of Honour, and *Pelican Record* vol.XIII, No.6 (<<https://www.ccc.ox.ac.uk/Roll-of-Honour-1914-1918/>> accessed 30-5-2017). Alfred Peel's officer personal record in the National Archives is WO339/36797. He was in 'C' Company, 6/Royal Berkshire. His brother was 2/Lt with 'D' Battery, 168 Brigade RFA. He had been articled to a chartered accountant in Bradford and after the war he lived in Wolverhampton. Alfred's war service is reported in *Newbury Weekly News* 17th August 1916 and 17th May 1917; and also in the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 19th May 1917 (findmypast.co.uk).

I acknowledge the generous assistance of Phil Wood, www.westberkshirewarmemorials.org.uk, in the preparation of this biography. His identification of Laura Jessie Hill as Alfred's mother was confirmed by Lady Sally Peel, the widow of Alfred's younger brother Sir John Peel. I am very grateful to Nick Thorn, Development Director at Corpus, for his very helpful advice.

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