

GEOFFREY AMBLER ARMITAGE



27th February 1917

1886-1917 Age 30

Captain, 16th (Service) Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment, 1st 'Bradford Pals'.

Geoffrey Ambler Armitage was the second of three children of George Armitage and Edith Ambler. Their fathers were both involved in Bradford's woollen industry, Armitage as a master cloth dyer and Ambler as the master of a spinning mill. George was a younger son and went into business on his own as a mohair merchant. He and Edith were married in 1881, and they occupied a succession of mansions in Shipley, Heaton and Manningham. Their first child was a daughter, Sybil, followed by sons Geoffrey and Harold. Geoffrey was born on 29th May 1886. He entered the junior school in 1895 when he was nine, his brother joining him two years later. In September 1899, Geoffrey had done well enough to skip two forms into Third Modern. In 1900, their parents moved the brothers to board at Woodbridge School in Suffolk. Geoffrey represented the School at cricket in the match against a Past XI, and he played for the Second XI at soccer. In 1902 he gained the Lower School Certificate. Harold was also a soccer player, and he won the Form II Maths prize.

Geoffrey left Woodbridge in July 1903 and returned to Bradford aged seventeen to work for his father. By 1911 he was managing the business of Geo. Armitage & Co., mohair merchants, whose premises were at 2 Commercial Street, Bradford. His father died in March 1914. Geoffrey had joined the volunteer Yorkshire Dragoons in 1904 and rose to the rank of corporal. Even the rank-and-file troopers of such a Yeomanry unit were well-heeled, needing a horse or regular access to one. The demands of running the family firm meant he had to resign in March 1911. He was also a member of the Bradford Amateur Rowing Club. He remained unmarried and lived at the family home on Selborne Grove, near Lister Park.

At the outbreak of war in 1914 Geoffrey was 28. He did not enlist in the first rush of enthusiasm; however, on 20th December he applied for a commission at Belle Vue Barracks. Colonel Muller of the recently-formed 1st Bradford Pals, himself an Old Bradfordian, accepted Geoffrey as a Second Lieutenant. He went on active service first to Egypt in December 1915, and then to France in 1916. Promotion to Lieutenant followed. He survived the



disaster which struck his battalion on 1st July because he was in the reserve. That afternoon Armitage went forward to help organize the survivors. He was given command of 'A' Company, and promoted to Captain. On 19th August he went sick with severe eczema and was admitted to 14th General Hospital on the French coast. While convalescing in London he met Grace Fogg, who lived in Wembley. She was 24, the daughter of a water board clerk. They married on 7th October, and after a few weeks of life together, on 28th November Geoffrey departed for France. He reached the front at Hebuterne with a draft of new men on 6th December, in the midst of the hardest winter in memory.

On 27th February 1917, Armitage led one of two companies assigned to attack Rossignol Wood, from which the Germans were thought to be pulling back. Failure to advance on their right exposed 'A' Company to heavy machine-gun fire and severe casualties, among them Armitage. His wife and mother were initially informed that he was missing, but confirmation of his death soon followed. He was buried in a mass grave with 43 of his men. His superiors wrote to his widow that he was a capable officer who was always cheery and optimistic, and was popular with his fellow officers and his men. They assured her his death was instant and painless. He was one of the last of the original officers of the 1st Pals.



Acknowledgements:

The photo is from an anonymous album of newspaper cuttings of First World War Bradford dead held in the West Yorkshire Local Studies Library. I am grateful to Jennifer Kiff for drawing it to my attention. The family history was researched using Ancestry.com. Kelly's Directory of Bradford and its Suburbs 1912 gives the company address. The BGS Annual Reports for 1899 and 1900 record Geoffrey's last two years. I am very grateful to Melanie Chew, Development Director, The Seckford Foundation, for seeking out information for me in the Woodbridge School archives. My thanks also go to Barbara Edwards, Hon. Sec. of Bradford Amateur Rowing Club, for locating a copy of the club's 1914-1918 memorial book and allowing me access to it.

For the Yeomanry, Richard Holmes, *Tommy. The British Soldier on the Western Front 1914-1918* (Harper Collins, London, 2004), 121-128. Harold was also in the Yorkshire Dragoons for 3 years before the war. He was employed by Geo. Armitage, Dyers, of Thornton Road, and was one of the executors of their father's will. He re-joined the regiment when war began (Yorkshire Observer, 14-11-1914).

Geoffrey's Officer File is **WO 339/16485**. Further details of his service record are from the War Diary of the 16th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment (<http://interactive.ancestry.co.uk/60779/43849_2362_0-00000?pid=735125&backurl=http%3A%2F%2Fsearch.ancestry.co.uk%2F%2Fcgi-bin%2Fsse.dll%3F_phsrc%3DmQO2%26_phstart%3DsuccessSource%26usePUBJs%3Dtrue%26indiv%3D1%26dbid%3D60779%26_F80088F0%3DP072S163%26_F80088F0_x%3D1%26gss%3Dangs-d%26pcat%3D39%26fh%3D0%26h%3D735125%26recoff%3D76%26ml_rpos%3D1&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usepub=true&_phsrc=mQO2&_phstart=successSource&usepubjs=true&bm=true#?imageid=43849_2362_0-00034&imageld=43849_2362_0-00063>), entries for 1-4 July, 16 August, 6 December 1916. The report on the attack on Rossignol Wood are included there. Also, David Raw, *Bradford Pals* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword, 2005), 254, where Armitage is named George in error for Geoffrey. There are references to Armitage's death on the Bradford Daily Telegraph for 6, 9 and 13 March 1917.

Grace Lillian (sic) Fogg appeared before the Dean's Court, Diocese of London on 3 October 1917 to declare that there was no impediment for the solemnization of her marriage to Armitage. Their address 14 Chatsworth Avenue, Wembley Hill, Middlesex was her father's home—he lived there when he died in 1924. I have not been able to trace her after the war.

The photo of the mass grave at Owl Trench Cemetery was taken by the author. Rossignol Wood is in the background.

This biography was researched and composed by Nick Hooper (Nhooper1956@googlemail.com), February 2017.

