

EDGAR WILLIS



1st July 1916

1892-1916 Age 24

Private 16/614, 16th (Service) Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment, 1st Bradford 'Pals'.

Edgar's parents were Herbert Willis and Sarah Hannah Holt, who married in 1881. They were both born in Bradford. Herbert's father Charles had been a textile warehouseman until a windfall enabled him to retire in his thirties and to live off the income from renting out houses. Sarah's father was a dyer from Leeds. She was the second of his nine children, and before marrying she was the house-keeper for her parents, responsible for her seven younger siblings. Herbert Willis had to work for a living, in various areas of Bradford's textile industry, until by 1911 he had his own business as a worsted and yarn merchant. Herbert and Sarah had six children altogether. Edgar was the third of the four who survived, and their eldest son. He started at Bradford Grammar School in the junior department in 1902 when he was ten, remaining for six years. When he left in July 1908, aged sixteen, his best subject was German, and he was competent in French and Geography. Edgar went to work as a warehouseman for a yarn merchant, doubtless his father. When he enlisted he gave his occupation as Yarn Merchant, possibly with a degree of exaggeration, unless his father had taken him into partnership.

When war broke out in 1914, Edgar waited until mid-September to enlist, following the Lord Mayor's announcement that he was recruiting a Bradford Battalion. From his number, 614, we know that he volunteered on or shortly after the 11th of that month. The volunteers lived at home and trained in Lister Park and at the ice rink on Manningham Lane until they marched to camp near Skipton in January 1915. Their first uniforms were of blue cloth, and until these were issued the volunteers wore lapel badges supplied by the Bradford jewellers Fattorini to avoid being seen as shirkers.

At the end of December 1915, Willis embarked with the 1st Bradford 'Pals' for Egypt as part of 31st Division, and then moved to France with them in March 1916. On 1st July they would be in the



second wave of 93 Brigade's advance on Serre, starting about one hundred yards behind the British front line. As they left their assembly trench they ran into a storm of fire from German machine-guns, rifles and shells, and many men did not even reach their own front trench. There was confusion regarding who had died and what the fate of the missing soldiers was. Edgar Willis was initially said to have been slightly wounded, then on 1st August the Bradford Daily Telegraph reported he was missing. None of his surviving comrades were able to confirm his fate, and when his probate was registered in 1917 it was finally 'presumed' that he died 'on or since 1st July 1916.' His body was never identified, although it may lie in one of the unknown graves in the British cemeteries near Serre. His name is among the 122 from the 1st Bradford 'Pals' on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing.



Acknowledgements:

Willis's photo is courtesy of the O.B.A. Roll of Honour. His family and military records are from Ancestry.com. His school record is from the B.G.S. Annual Reports for 1903-1908. The Bradford Daily Telegraph report was consulted in the Bradford Local Studies Library. For the 'Pals' at Serre, see David Raw, [Bradford Pals](#) (Pena & Sword, Barnsley, 2008) chapter 10. Eustace Hyde, who was number 16/591 in the 16th Battalion is known to have enlisted on 11th September.

This biography was researched and compiled by Nick Hooper in June/November 2016 (Nhooper1956@googlemail.com).