

GERALD HARMER



11th August 1916

1895-1916 Age 21

Second Lieutenant 9th Battalion North Staffordshire Regiment.

Gerald was the only surviving child of Francis Gerald Harmer and Julia Trenam. He was born in Leeds in 1895, probably in July. His father Francis was originally from Gloucestershire, where his father had been a coachman in service, and later a grocer in Ludlow. In 1881, when he was fifteen, Francis was a 'pupil teacher'. After he qualified he took a position in Helmsley in North Yorkshire, where in 1894 he married Julia, daughter of an ironmonger and watchmaker. By the following year they had moved to Headingley, Leeds, and lived near the rugby and cricket grounds. Francis became head master of Cockburn High School, opened by Leeds City Council in 1902 in Hunslet, on the opposite side of Leeds from his home. This was a fee-paying grammar school with custom-built premises on Burton Avenue, yet Harmer sent his own son Gerald to Bradford Grammar School from 1907 to 1914. He was doubtless an example of the sort of bright boy who Headmaster Keeling 'poached' from schools around Bradford.

Gerald started at B.G.S. when he was twelve. He was in the Classical forms throughout his time at the school, and his father clearly intended him for university. In his final year he was Secretary of the (rugby) Football XV, and one of the football officers for Green House. In 1914 Harmer passed Higher School Certificates in Greek, Scripture, English and History, and he won an Open Classical Scholarship to Downing College, Cambridge. Despite the war, he went up in the Autumn. The 'Cambridge Letter' in The Bradfordian for March 1915 described how barely a third of the usual number of undergraduates were present, and half of those present were so heavily involved in military training that they had no time for the seasonal sports. It is likely that Harmer joined the University O.T.C., for in March 1915 The Bradfordian listed him as a Second Lieutenant with the 9th Battalion North Staffordshire Regiment, a rank he could not have achieved without some military experience.



Harmer's battalion went to France on 29th July 1915, but he was not yet sufficiently trained to join it, and he did not cross until the following April. He seems to have been held back at the base for several months and he was probably one of the officers who joined the 9th battalion at the end of July, or even the solitary officer who arrived on 4th August. The 9th was a pioneer battalion whose primary task was field works. Before and during the Somme fighting they were kept busy making and repairing roads and light railways, digging communication trenches, burying the dead, carrying essential supplies and so on, with much of this work done at night. Nor did these duties keep them from the front. On the night of 10th August, in the words of the battalion War Diary, '*A Company went forward to dig, if possible, a new communication trench from our front line to the Old German Intermediate line taken by us. Coming under heavy machine gun fire immediately they left the trench they had to abandon it [the task], and spent some hours enlarging and deepening saps from the front line. Second Lieutenant Harmer was killed and three other ranks wounded.*'

There is no record of what happened to his body, and he has no known grave. He is remembered on the Thiepval Memorial.



Acknowledgements:

Harmer's photo is from the O.B.A. Roll of Honour. The paltry details about his family were found on Ancestry.com. His school record comes from the Annual Class Lists and The Bradfordian in the school archives. I am very grateful for the collaboration of Jenny Ulph, College Archivist, Downing College Cambridge, who supplied the 1914 matriculation photo. For Cockburn High School, see [http://www.hunslet.org/Hunslet Moor \(1\).html](http://www.hunslet.org/Hunslet_Moor_(1).html). The 9th North Staffordshire War Diary was consulted on Ancestry.com. The date of his arrival in France is given on the Medal Index Card. He is not named among the officers who joined the battalion in the months following—the fifteen who joined in July-August remain anonymous.

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