

# ERIC KAY



20th July 1918

1899-1918 Aged 18

## Rifleman 61903, 8th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment ('Leeds Rifles').

Eric Kay was born in Manningham on 15th August 1899. He was the fifth and youngest child of Arthur Kay and his wife Sarah Ann (nee Allen). Arthur succeeded to his father's cement business during the 1890s, and went into partnership as a builders' merchant with premises in the area known as Coppy Quarry which now lies under Westgate car park. Sarah was born in India, but by 1889 when they married she lived in Shipley. She died in 1908. When Eric started at Bradford Grammar School in September 1911, his family lived on Victor Road, which lies on the far side of Lister Park from the site of the modern school. He had just passed his twelfth birthday and would be a pupil there for five years, on the modern side. After a disappointing first year he progressed well in Maths, French and German, and when he left in July 1915 he worked as a bank clerk.

One month after his seventeenth birthday, Eric attested for military service under the Military Service Act and was transferred to the Army Reserve until he was of age. Although he could have volunteered sooner, he waited to be called up one month after his eighteenth birthday. His medical inspection in March showed him to be above average height at 5 feet 6 1/2 inches, and he weighed nine and a half stones. The training system was in process of being reorganised and he was despatched with other men of the same age from his area to 6th Training Reserve Battalion, transferred to 51st Graduated Battalion and then 53rd (Young Soldier) Battalion. These were based in large hutted camps on Cannock Chase. After four months basic infantry training and further specialist training he and his contemporaries were fit and strong, and were trained in the specialist roles required by the improved tactics now employed by the British. Under ordinary circumstances Eric could not have been deployed overseas before he was nineteen, but the crisis induced by the German Spring Offensive in late March 1918 made the government reduce the overseas service age by six months. A draft of men including Eric was sent to the Infantry Base Depot at Etaples, near Boulogne in early April, then posted to



8th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment, which they joined in the field on the 13th. The following months were fairly quiet until on 15th July at 3 a.m. 62nd Division was transferred by rail, bus and on foot to join French 5th Army to participate in Marshal Foch's counter-attack along the Marne which started to turn the tide of the war in the Allies' favour. This was an international battle, with French soldiers supported by American and Italian as well as British divisions. On 20th July the 8th and 2/5th Battalions West Yorkshire Regiment reached their starting position just before zero hour at 8 a.m. after a nightmare journey through dense and pathless woods in total darkness. Their advance on the right bank of the River Aisne lay across an open hillside golden with ripe wheat. The creeping barrage fired by French and Italian gunners fell one thousand yards ahead of the attackers, missing the many German machine-gun posts which were well dug in, camouflaged, and arranged in depth. Within an hour the 8th West Yorkshire advance was held up. Casualties were nearly three hundred, twenty of them missing. One of these was Kay. His body was later buried where it was found, then removed to Marfaux Cemetery in 1919. He is remembered at St. Barnabas Church in Heaton. His only brother William, who had been in the Navy since 1911, served on H.M.S. Queen Elizabeth and survived the war.



### **Acknowledgements:**

There is no photo of Kay in the School Memorial Book—this photo was taken by the author. The family was researched using Ancestry.com. For Arthur's business, see Kelly's Directory of Bradford 1911 and <<http://www.bradfordhistorical.org.uk/brunswick.html>>, accessed 18-7-2018 . Eric's years at B.G.S. are recorded in the Annual Reports for 1911 to 1915. His Service Record is damaged but reveals the framework of Eric's service and his medical report. The account of the conscription, training and experience of the young conscripts of 1917-18 in Tim Lynch, *They Did Not Grow Old. Teenage Conscripts on the Western Front*, (Spellmount, Stroud, 2013) is well told in chapters 7-11. For 8/West Yorks. see Everard Wyrall, *The West Yorkshire Regiment in the War 1914-1918*, (Bodley Head, London, no date), vol.2, 295-99. See also the sources cited in the biography of James Eric Appleyard.

This biography was researched and composed by Nick Hooper in July 2018. For further information, contact Nhooper1956@googlemail.com, or see <<http://www.bradfordgrammar.com/former-pupils/bradford-grammar-school-in-ww1/>>.