

# JOHN ALFRED EMSLEY



**1st December 1918**

**1890-1918 Aged 29**

**Captain and Adjutant, 2nd-6th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment (T.F.), Mentioned in Despatches.**

John Alfred Emsley was the only son of John Emsley, a successful Bradford worsted manufacturer, and Emily Sutcliffe who married in 1889. He was their first child, known as Alfred, and was followed by two sisters. In the 1890s the family lived in West Bowling where Alfred attended Ryan Street and Marshfield Schools until he went to the Bradford Grammar School in September 1900. He was a pupil on the Modern side from the ages of ten to fourteen. He was academically quite successful, and in May 1904 he moved to Uppingham School for two years. Further study followed in Belgium and Germany, presumably in the textile industry, before in 1908 he joined his father as a partner in John Emsley & Co. In 1912 he married Nellie Longbottom, daughter of a Bingley merchant.

While at Uppingham, Alfred was in the school's Officer Training Corps, and in January 1908 in Bradford he joined the Territorial Force 6th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment. There Alfred was among his former school-fellows who formed the majority of 'H' Company commanded by an Old Bradfordian. By the outbreak of war in 1914 he was a Captain and had just finished a course at the School of Musketry at Hythe. He did not proceed to France in April 1915 with 6th Battalion, remaining in Bradford as Musketry Instructor and then Adjutant to the Reserve, later 2nd-6th Battalion. A possible reason may be that he was not fully fit. He suffered from *talipes valgus*, a condition in which the feet rotate inwards, which may be why a masseuse lived at the family home of Hedge Nook, Allerton at the time of the 1911 census. Alfred served in the U.K. throughout 1915-16 as temporary Major and Adjutant, and when the 2nd-6th finally left for France on 6th January 1917 he went with it.

It was stated that Emsley went over the top six times without a scratch, although as Adjutant he will have remained with battalion Head Quarters. After the disastrous 3rd May attack on Bullecourt reduced 2nd-6th to nine officers and 130 rifles, Colonel Hastings was replaced by Colonel Hoare. We get an insight into the battalion from a letter written in September by a French interpreter: 'The Colonel ... boasts an income of several hundred thousand francs—he's a



regular, very strict, and not much liked—he's so blunt and unpredictable! The "Second in command" and the "Adjutant" [Emsley] are a bit richer than him—And all of this makes for an extravagant Mess—in our dug-out, in the front line, we have Médoc, St. Émilien, old Whisky, game etc ... - Which doesn't prevent the Battalion from being a "crack Btn" for the Boche as well.' At Cambrai on 22nd November Colonel Hoare had to send the H.Q. detail to shore up a threatened flank. Sergeant-Major Pickard wrote that 'Major Emsley did most gallant work ... took up a rifle and manned a post ... and helped to drive off a Boche counter-attack. How he missed a decoration passes me.' It may be this action that earned his Mention in Despatches in January 1918. At the end of that month the 2nd-6th was broken up and the men distributed among other West Yorkshire battalions.

Emsley joined the H.Q. of an Irish command. On active service his foot condition had flared up and in May a Medical Board classed him fit only for home service. On 1st October he joined the H.Q. of 207th Infantry Brigade at Clipstone Camp, Nottingham. It was there he contracted influenza from which he died on 1st December. He was buried at Scholemoor Cemetery. The *Yorkshire Observer* reported: 'All the blinds were drawn on the route of the cortege from Hedgenook [sic] to Allerton Wesleyan Chapel and reverent crowds were assembled on the road sides to pay their tribute of respect.' His Brigadier wrote, 'he was a real able officer'. The two Colonels he served added, 'he was a man of the greatest ability' and '[y]our son was one of the most capable men I have ever met.... I feel that the country has lost a man capable and willing to work hard for his country in peace as in war.' He left a widow and three children, John, Helen and Alfreda (born posthumously).

Old Bradfordians—'We will remember them'



### Acknowledgements:

The photo is taken from the *A Souvenir Volume to commemorate the unveiling of the Allerton and Daisy Hill War Memorial. July 29th 1922* (Bradford, 1922). The family was researched using Ancestry.co.uk and findmypast.co.uk. Emsley is remembered on the Marshfield School Plaque, and the memorials at Bradford Grammar School and Uppingham School. Alfred's B.G.S. years are recorded in the Annual Reports for 1901 to 1904. For the Uppingham School Roll, <<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/interactive/34997/00000001?backurl=https%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestry.co.uk%2fsearch%2fdb.aspx%3fdbid%3d34997%26path%3d&ssrc=&backlabel=ReturnBrowsing#?imageld=00000206>>. Emsley's career was summarized in De Ruvigny's Roll of Honour (Ancestry.co.uk), from which the quotes by Emsley's commanding officers are quoted, and *Yorkshire Post* Monday 2nd December 1918 (findmypast.co.uk). His Officer Personal Record (T.N.A. WO 374-22792) is the source for his foot and ankle condition. He attributed this to much standing when he entered business in 1908. The French interpreter's letter is quoted from *Lettres de Guerre* of Jacques Vaché, accessed from <<https://mrtheinterpreter.wordpress.com/26th-battalion-west-yorkshire-regiment/>> (20.11.1918), quoted as punctuated on the webpage. The *Yorkshire Observer* account of the funeral is quoted from <[http://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/news/11195889.Why\\_did\\_soldier\\_leave\\_his\\_family\\_in\\_Bradford\\_after\\_First\\_World\\_War\\_/#r3z-addoor](http://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/news/11195889.Why_did_soldier_leave_his_family_in_Bradford_after_First_World_War_/#r3z-addoor)>. It states inaccurately that Emsley fought through the Somme—he did not go to France until after that offensive had ceased. For the 2nd-6th West Yorkshire's record in 1917, see Captain E.C. Gregory, *History of the Sixth Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment. Vol. II 2/6th Battalion*, (Percy Lund Humphries, Bradford, 1923). The quotation about Cambrai is from 147-8.

Emsley was buried in Scholemoor Cemetery, I.U.A355, where there is a monument to him. His parents endowed in Bradford Cathedral one of a peal of ten bells in memory of men who fell in the Great War. His father's effects on his death in 1944 were valued at £21 million in 2018 values. Near Marshfield Primary School is Emsley (Alfred) Memorial Recreation Park, endowed in trust by John Emsley in memory of his son. My thanks to Ray Greenhough for advice on Marshfield School and Emsley Park—see R. Greenhough, *Marshfield School: Our Heroes of World War 1*, (Published by R Greenhough, 2014).

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