

MARK YEWDALL



13th November 1918

1881-1918 Aged 37

Private 764281, 1st-28th Battalion London Regiment (Artists' Rifles).

In November 1917 Mark Yewdall survived an attack on Passchendaele Ridge in which most of his battalion became casualties, only to die of illness two days after the war ended. He was born in February 1881 in Calverley, the sixth of the seven surviving children of Zechariah Yewdall, a prosperous wool manufacturer of Calverley, and Emma Petrie, the daughter of a Rochdale iron founder. In the mid-seventeenth century an ancestor had converted to Quakerism, but Mark's grandfather David was a leading supporter of the United Methodist Free Church in Eccleshill. Mark went to the Bradford Grammar School in 1894 around his thirteenth birthday. He was a competent student in the Classical forms, although he repeated the Fourth form, and in September 1896 his parents sent him to board at The Leys Schools in Cambridge, a Methodist foundation. After he left school, Mark worked as a clerk in a bank. Initially he had a flat in his father's house, then in 1911 he was lodging in Otley. By the time of his enlistment he had been promoted to cashier and resided in Nottingham.

Mark did not volunteer to serve and it is known from the letters he wrote to his family, which his eldest sister Ellen transcribed, that they all saw the war as avoidable, wicked and useless. He was conscripted at the end of 1916 and on 2nd January 1917, a month short of his thirty-sixth birthday, he reported for service and was assigned to the Artist's Rifles. The huge losses of the Somme offensive of 1916 required the ranks of the B.E.F. to be filled up with men with little training. Mark was sent to France after only six weeks in uniform, before he had even fired his rifle. He wrote to his father, 'we are not really a fighting unit at all.' The letters reveal how difficult the basic training was for a man used to a sedentary office routine, and in early March he was admitted to hospital suffering with Bronchitis (according to his service record—his letters described it as pleurisy). In May he had a spell in the front line and a dose of gas gave him a dry cough. He enjoyed the opportunities to get away from military routine, running the canteen, acting as a Military Policeman, and for several weeks acting as clerk to the Town Major of a French village. This posting came to an end in late August and Mark rejoined his platoon in the line near Arras.



In late September the Artists' Rifles prepared to take part in the Third Battle of Ypres. It went into the line on 27th October and at 5.50 a.m. on the 30th it attacked near Passchendaele. Over 300 men became casualties, only 156 remaining at duty. Mark wrote home: 'All others mown down and blown up before my eyes. Poor Mr. Williams is killed, so is our dear Chaplain & our Captain—but I needn't (& can't go on) - only to say that 6 have come back in my platoon ... One can only rage at the system that employs infantry in a war of shells.... Every step took one over the knees in gripping slime. I saw many sucked down & drowned & I had near escapes myself. A shell blew my section into a shell-hole—all wounded but me.' He doubted that he could do it again, but on 30th December the battalion again suffered heavily fighting in snow near Cambrai. In 1918 Yewdall's battalion saw action in the March Retreat (luckily Mark was on leave), in the advance which commenced in August, and breaking the Hindenburg Line. Yewdall was appointed batman to a newly-arrived officer, a job which brought welcome perks, but his sister copied no more of his letters.

On his return from Leeds on 9th November Zechariah Yewdall announced, 'Mark is alright, there will be no more fighting.' A Field Service Postcard arrived from him next day stating that he was en route to the base hospital at Etaples, but was not bad suffering from Bronchitis again. It was only on the day after the Armistice was signed that a telegram reported his condition had worsened. On the 16th news arrived that he had died on the 13th. It is possible the 'Broncho-Pneumonia' which caused his death resulted from influenza, however the report in his file states 'Death due to exposure ...' (the rest is illegible).

Old Bradfordians—'We will remember them'

'The Lads That Will Never Be Old'



Acknowledgements:

I regret that I have lost track of who sent me the photo of Mark Yewdall—it is not in the school memorial book. The family was researched using Ancestry.co.uk. His years at B.G.S. are recorded in the Annual Reports for 1894-1896. For The Leys, see <<http://www.wv1-yorkshires.org.uk/html-files/cambridge-leys-school.htm>> accessed 16-10-2016.

Mark's service record is available on Ancestry.co.uk and findmypast.co.uk. It includes letters from Zechariah in which he sought to find out more regarding his son and permission to visit him. Later correspondence concerns items missing from his effects—a purse, wallet and watch, with the implication that they were pilfered. For Mark's letters, I used (1) Malcolm Brown, *The Imperial War Museum Book of 1918: Year of Victory* (Macmillan, London, 1998), 11-12 (lengthy excerpt from the Passchendaele letter); (2) David Eastwood, 'Private Mark Yewdall 764281, 28th Battalion, London Regiment (Artists' Rifles) and the Battle of Passchendaele', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, Vol.77, 2005, 253-263, consulted online at <<https://archive.org/details/YAJ0772005/page/253?q=Yewdall>> (12.11.2018), for a full analysis of Mark's correspondence. I acknowledge my debt to the latter. Like other commentators, I have assumed that Mark was conscripted. His Attestation declared him fit for 'General Service', and he had earlier been rejected on grounds of weak eyesight caused by a bout of shingles. However, the Artists' Rifles was an exclusive unit which required a recommendation. I wonder why he was posted to this unit rather than to the training battalion associated with Nottingham. For the actions involving the Artists' Rifles see my biography of Old Bradfordian F.G. Woodhead, died 31.12.1917, who also served in the battalion.



Mark Yewdall's grave at Etaples British Military Cemetery L.B.13 (photo taken by the author).