

As the third in a series of special supplements we commemorate the centenary of the Battle of the Somme with the story of a man from Thame who lost his life on the first fatal day, and a letter written by another man from Thame who took part in the action as a Machine Gunner



### Dateline Saturday 1 July 1916

The middle day of the middle year of the First World War.

At 7.30 in the morning the artillery barrage, which had filled the previous week, lifted from the German front line onto their reserve positions. Birds could be heard singing but on the ground there was only fear. All along the front line, officers in the trenches blew their whistles.

The troops scrambled up ladders to go over the top. There was no running. The Generals were confident that the artillery would have long ago cleared the opposing trenches – ‘It will be a walk-over’, they said. Men were told to walk across, laden with equipment, in an orderly fashion and to occupy the empty trenches on the other side of no man’s land.

They were met with relentless artillery and machine gun fire, and thousands of brave men were cut down in minutes. By the end of that day nearly twenty thousand British soldiers had lost their lives. Another forty thousand were wounded.

It was the blackest day in British Military history, the highest number of casualties ever suffered in a single day, before or since. Yet only in a small stretch of the southern sector was any ground taken on that first day, a total of just three square miles.

It was intended as a diversionary action to take the pressure off the French Army who, since February, had been gallantly defending the old fortress town of Verdun, and were nearing breaking point. But the Battle of the Somme raged on for another four months, during which the allies had advanced a mere five miles at tremendous cost.



Along the line both German and British armies had built a complex system of trenches and dug-outs, protected by barbed wire. Living and fighting in a trench was harsh. It was often cold, wet, shared with lice, disease-ridden rats, and dead bodies, and constantly vulnerable to poison gas, snipers, and enemy artillery fire.

The final reckoning was that more than a million men, from both sides, had been killed or wounded. Amongst them during those 141 days from 1<sup>st</sup> July to 18 November 1916 were nineteen men from Thame who would never see their homes or their families again.

## **2nd Lt F W Fielding London Regiment**



**Francis Willoughby Fielding** died on the first day of the Somme, 1 July 1916, at Gommecourt.

Born in Towersey and educated at Lord Williams's Grammar School, Thame, he had joined the Queens Own Oxfordshire Hussars in 1909, and was mobilised with them at the outbreak of war. They saw action in the doomed attempts to save Dunkirk and Antwerp from the German advance, and then fell into the routine of trench warfare, holding the line at Messines. He was wounded and invalided back to the UK but returned to the Western Front in April 1915 with a Commission in the 9th Battalion of the London Regiment.

On 1st July 1916 the battalion was one of the lead units in the attack at Gommecourt – a diversionary attack intended to fool the Germans into believing that it would be the main thrust and thus draw some of their troops away from the rest of the line. Unfortunately it was launched in a most inappropriate place, being a well-established German stronghold, and the London Regiment suffered heavy losses, including the death of 2nd Lieutenant Francis Willoughby Fielding, age 23.

### **In Memoriam**

Those men from Thame who died during the Battle of the Somme

**1 July 1916**

2nd Lt F W Fielding - London Regiment

**20 July 1916**

Private J B Shaw - Royal Welsh Fusiliers

**22 July 1916**

Private S A Shrimpton - Royal Fusiliers

**24 July 1916**

Corporal J Howlett DCM - Royal Engineers

**4 August 1916**

Lieutenant N A Target - Durham Light Inf

**24 August 1916**

Corporal J C Hoadley - Royal Engineers

**30 August 1916**

Sergeant H J Shrimpton - Oxf & Bucks LI

**31 August 1916**

Private H C Wilsden - Middlesex Regiment

**3 September 1916**

2nd Lt H C Bernard - Gloucester Regiment

Private F J Goodman - Oxf & Bucks Light Inf

Rifleman R A Pullen - Rifle Brigade

**9 September 1916**

Cpl C B Bateman - Machine Gun Corps

2nd Lt O Tyrrell - London Regiment

**15 September 1916**

Rifleman S M Dicker - King Royal Rifle Corps

Private D V Lidington - Norfolk Regt

Corporal C D Ward - Canadian Infantry

**25 October 1916**

Private A V Young - Machine Gun Corps

**17 November 1916**

Private R Eaton - Oxf & Bucks Light Inf

**6 December 1916**

Private S Howlett - Royal Berkshire Regt

## THAME GAZETTE AUG 8, 1916

### LETTER FROM THE FRONT

We have received the following letter from Lance Corporal A V Young, who is serving with a machine gun section in France.

"Just a line to say I am all right and back once more from the ding-dong battle. We went into action on the 1st of July, and after seven days stiff fighting came back to the large guns for three days rest, went back again for another week, and then three days more rest and at it again for another week: so we had three weeks stiff fighting. We suffered heavily, but the Germans suffered double and more than us. Picked divisions were selected for this affair and our division was on the right and on the left of the French, so we had our hands full; and our division, which is composed of Scotch Regiments and South Africans, had a debt to pay for the battle of Loos last September, and well the Germans knew it when we got amongst them. This was the first experience for some of the South Africans in trench warfare, but they did themselves justice: they and the Gordon Highlanders at times fought themselves to a standstill. First you would see them chasing the

Germans, and then the Germans chasing them; it was a ding-dong battle. I see fighting is going on at the same woods and village now, but we are gradually

getting the upper hand of the Germans. There were times when the Colonels asked for relief, but the General said the position would have to be held at all costs, and bravely the division did it and repelled all counter-attacks until finally relieved by another division. I am not allowed to mention the names of regiment but I saw them all, and do not think any other Thameite would be in the advance in which I was in from July 1st to 27th. After two days march down



### Albert V Young

Albert Victor Young was born in Thame in 1883 to Mr and Mrs John Young of the Four Horse Shoes public house in Park Street Thame. Albert worked at the pub and was well known in the town.

Prior to the war Albert served for seven years in the Royal Irish Rifles. As a National Reservist he joined up on the outbreak of hostilities in the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry (10097) and was drafted to France in late 1914. Wounded In November 1915 he returned home and on recovering joined the Machine Gun Corps (10304) and was sent to France just before Easter 1916.

In those early days of July, Albert was in the southern part of the British line near Mametz, which was the one area where the initial advance was successful. He would have served throughout the Battle of the Somme but was killed by shellfire on 26<sup>th</sup> October 1916, aged only 33.

Notification of his death was sent by his section commander in the following letter.

"Dear Mr and Mrs Young. It causes me great regret in having to write to you these few sorrowful lines, in which I tell you your son Albert met his death out here on the morning of the 25th October by shell-fire. On behalf of myself and his comrades, I must say he was a soldier that was much admired by his company. He was well liked, trustful and a most willing and intelligent worker, and we all join in and send our deepest sympathy. I may also state that after your son met his death his body was brought in by his comrades and was laid to rest beside one of our own men who had fallen a few days before. Everything was done for him that could have been done but I am sorry to say there was no hope whatsoever as death must have been instantaneous. One of his .... Named C H Lowe who belongs to the Royal Army Medical Corps helped to carry him in and also stopped behind to see that his burial and everything was done respectfully. Once again we all send our deepest sympathy in your sad bereavement. I remain yours sincerely his section corporal

James McLeod (signaller)

*we passed the Royal Fusiliers, in which Alf Howland is a Corporal; I did not see him, but I enquired and found his battalion was on the way up to the fighting. I also saw Arthur Rush "Brummy", in the 2nd Oxfords on their way in that direction; we passed them in a large town and just had five minutes chat with him. He was the only Thame man I have seen near the fighting. The Germans had some tremendous dug-outs built in the bank of a trench about 20 feet below ground and quite safe from shell-fire; they came in very handy for us as we advanced. We are out for a good rest and to get reinforced; we do not know for how long, or where we are for (perhaps the best). We had several machine-guns knocked out by shell-fire, so I had plenty of work keeping the teams going as I am armourer and artificer to this machine-gun company. The enemy are nearly all Bavarians and good fighters, and the ground is chalky, so you can tell how the trenches were when it rained, and the wood-work used for dug-outs were fir trees just cut down through the centre (no paring), so you see the strength; no wonder our shell fire would not pierce the dug-outs. I saw some great air fights, and to see the different artillery no wonder the poor Germans surrendered when they got our field artillery, horse artillery, garrison artillery, 9.2 siege artillery and 15 in., in which I had great interest, being used by the Royal Marines Artillery; one could actually watch the shell travelling through the air. It was the first time I have seen a 15 in. gun in action, and they were shelling the German headquarters 12 miles away; goodness knows what the Germans thought - probably they thought they were dropping from the skies. We*

*are having some grand weather now, and I hope it is improving the crops at home. The crops out here are looking well; I passed some bearded wheat in a field yesterday, and I measured it, some of it being six feet long, which I thought a good length. The women work hard on the land out here, and cows are milked by women. I think I must now close, wishing all your readers the best of luck."*

#### **The other soldiers mentioned in the letter both survived the Somme but not the war:**

##### **Cpl Alf Howland of the Royal Fusiliers.**

On 31st July 1917, Sergeant Alfred Howland was wounded at the battle of Pilckem Ridge, near Ypres, and died of his wounds at a casualty clearing station on 4th August, age 34. He is buried in Brandhoek New Military Cemetery No.3 in Belgium.

##### **Arthur "Brummie" Rush 2nd Oxfords.**

He had served prior to the war and was in a reserves battalion in 1908. On the outbreak of WW1, men in this battalion formed the nucleus for reinforcements into the regular battalions and Arthur was posted to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. Having been made up locally to Lance Corporal he was with the battalion when on 28th April 1917 they took part in the attack to capture the villages of Arleux and Oppy, a precursor to the main Arras offensive a few days later. Heavy casualties were sustained, L/Cpl Rush being wounded, subsequently dying of his wounds on the 30th April, age 26.

### **About the Machine Gun Corps**

Machine Gun Corps was created by Royal Warrant on October 14 followed by an Army Order on 22 October 1915. The experience of fighting, particularly early on and in the First Battle of Ypres, had proved that the machine guns required special tactics and organisation. The MGC would eventually consist of infantry Machine Gun Companies, Cavalry Machine Gun Squadrons and Motor Machine Gun Batteries. A total of 170,500 officers and men served in the MGC, of which 62,049 were killed, wounded or missing.

The 27<sup>th</sup> Company of the Machine Gun Corps fired Lewis guns. These were shoulder-held-air-cooled light automatic weapons weighing in the region of 26 pounds. They were loaded with a circular magazine containing 47 rounds and the rate of fire was up to 700 rounds per minute in short bursts. Lewis guns were carried and fired by one man with another to carry and load the magazines.

