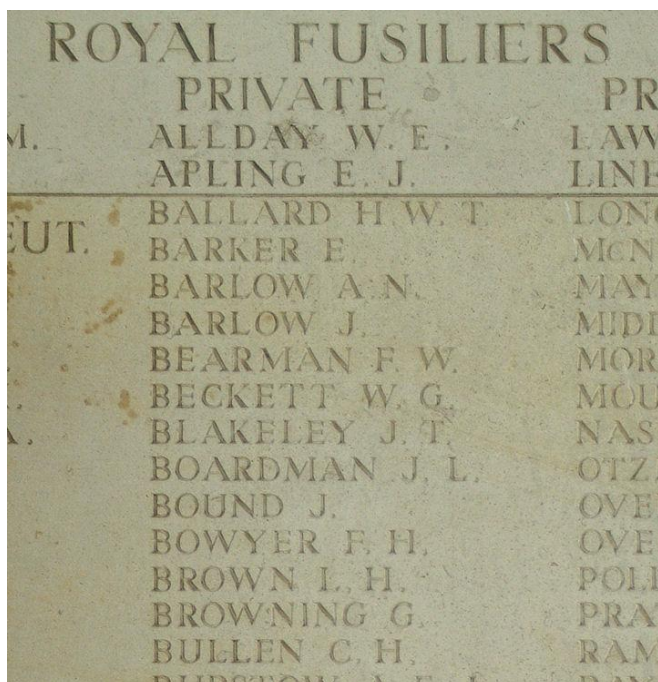


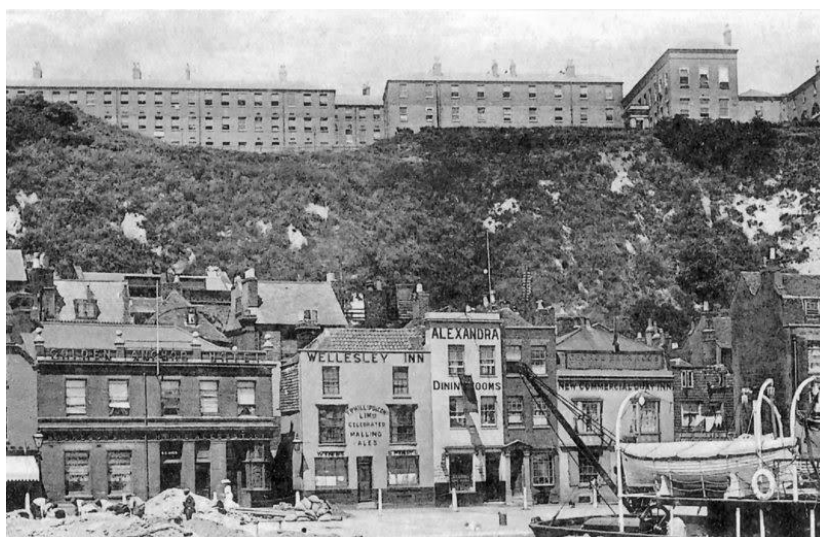
Private Frank Henry Bowyer – 1st Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment) L/8451



Frank Henry Bowyer was born in Sherington c 1882. His parents were Frederick Page Bowyer, a matting manufacturer born at Stevington, and Rachel Hannah Bunker a straw-worker born at Sherington. They married in 1876 and, before Frank was born, had two other children: Mary Elizabeth born c1877 and William Frederick Charles, born c1880, both born in Sherington. In 1881 the family was living in Water Lane, Sherington, probably Frank's birth place. His Grandfather, William, was also living in the household and interestingly he too was a mat-maker.

Unfortunately Frank's mother, Rachel, died in 1884 at the relatively young age of 35 years. Frank's father went on to marry Ellen Rebecca Redmond in the summer of 1885 at

Amphill. Ellen was a pillow lace-maker born at Cranfield. As a result Frank acquired a good number of new half brothers and sisters including: Annie Elizabeth b c1886, Albert George b c1889, Amelia Emily b 1891, Nellie b c1893, Freddie b c1896 and Elizabeth b c1899. They were all born at Cranfield, Ellen's home village. Shortly after Elizabeth's birth it appears the family returned to Frank's birth village of Sherington according to the 1901 census. By 1911, Frank had acquired three more half siblings all born at Sherington: Alice and Arthur, both born c1903 and presumably twins, as well as Alfred born c1906. Shortly afterwards, the family moved again and so in 1911 they were to be found living in Olney Road, Lavendon where Frank's father Frederick was still described as a matting manufacturer. Sadly Frank's half brother Freddie (in fact Frederick Thomas Bowyer), mentioned above, also perished in WW1. A tribute to Freddie is included elsewhere.



At some point Frank left home and enlisted in the Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment). In 1901 he was age 19 and a Private with the 4th Battalion billeted at the Shaft Barracks on the Western Heights of Dover in Kent. By about 1909 Frank had left the Colours and become a Reservist – he was then lodging with a Mr & Mrs Stafford in 'civvy street' at Islip near Thrapston.

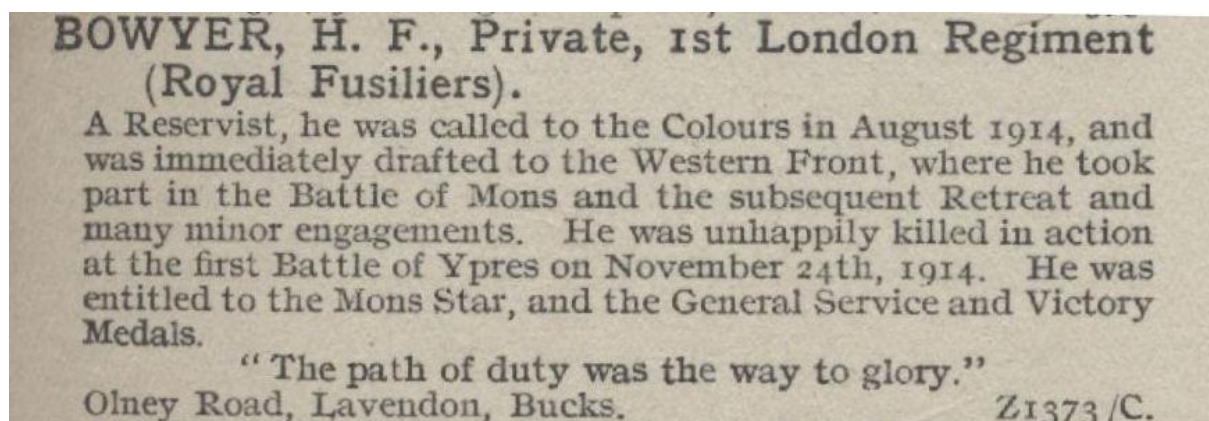
Above: Shaft Barracks (since demolished) on the Western Heights of Dover where Frank Bowyer was billeted in 1901.

Private Frank Henry Bowyer – 1st Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment) L/8451

On 4th August 1914, when war was declared on Germany, the 1st Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers was stationed in the south of Ireland. However, the Battalion moved first to Cambridge, probably where Frank re-joined the colours; it was then mobilised as part of the British Expeditionary Force, landing in France from 16th August onwards. The BEF travelled through northern France and arrived in the Mons area on 22nd August. The following day it seems that Frank was immediately involved in the Battle of Mons which was the first encounter of the War between German and British Forces. The latter were heavily outnumbered by the Germans and so a British retreat was ordered. As the Germans pressed on with their advance towards Paris the Allied troops mounted a series of counter attacks in the early part of September, and by 9th September it was the turn of the German Army to retreat following the First Battle of the Marne and a strategic victory for the Allied Forces.

The Germans entrenched themselves on high ground to the north bank of the River Aisne and in mid-September the BEF was involved in various unsuccessful attempts to dislodge them, notably the First Battle of Aisne. Following on from this, between the end of September and the end of November, both armies were seeking to exploit or protect the northern flank of the German position. This resulted in what has been called 'The Race to the Sea' - that is a general movement north-westwards towards the French-Belgian coast, with each Army trying to side-step each other around the northern flanks into unoccupied territory. A number of very distinct battles resulted during this period, notably including the First Battle of Ypres, 19th October – 22nd November. It was towards the end of this period of battle that Frank lost his life on 20 November 1914, little more than 3 months after he had re-joined the colours at the very start of the War. He thus had the dubious distinction of being the first soldier with a family in Lavendon to be killed in the War.

According to the War Diary of the Royal Fusiliers, in the weeks before his death Frank was based at Rue Petillon. In early November the weather was bright and sunny with fog clearing in the morning. The Battalion's lines were subject to much shelling and sniper fire and there were frequent casualties. By 9th November the weather turned dull, cold and wet, so much so that the trenches became unstable; one officer was killed when the dugout in which he was sleeping collapsed. On 14th November the Battalion moved a few miles to Chapel d'Armentieres to relieve the West Yorkshire Regiment in their trenches. It was again wet and, whilst under more sniper fire, the men spent time trying to improve the trenches that were filling with water. On 19th November: "Some snow and frightfully cold." On 20th November, the diary records very simply: "Still freezing. One private killed by sniper." This was undoubtedly the fate of Private Frank Bowyer. A further entry on the following day records that "Except for two days the Battalion completed today 35 days continuously in the trenches." Frank was certainly unlucky and doubtless cold, wet, tired and exhausted when he met his end.



Above: Extract from the National Roll of the Great War

Private Frank Henry Bowyer – 1st Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment) L/8451

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission clearly records that Frank Bowyer died on 20th November 1914 rather than the 24th November recorded in the extract from the National Roll shown above. Frank's name appears on Panel 3 of the Ploegsteert Memorial which stands in the Berks Cemetery Extension a few miles north of Armentieres.



Above: The Ploegsteert Memorial where Frank's name is recorded.



Left: The Royal Fusiliers Memorial in High Holborn, upon which the Inscription reads:

The Royal Fusiliers
(City of London Regiment).

To the Glorious Memory
of the 22,000 Royal Fusiliers
who fell in the Great War

1914 - 1919.

Private Frank Henry Bowyer – 1st Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment) L/8451

Postscript – Correspondence with the War Office following Frank's Death

As noted above, Frank's mother died in 1884 and his father died in 1912. Thus, neither parent knew about the death of their son Frank, nor indeed that of his half brother Freddie. It is therefore not surprising that in the following letter written in support of his former landlady, Frank is said to have had 'no place of his own to call home'.

May 4 1915
Dear Sir
E/58190/1 accounts 4

Mrs Stafford of this village whom I have known for the last six years has shown me your letter re Private Frank Bowyer of the 1st Batt Royal Fusiliers who was killed in action. The above lodged with Mrs Stafford for 5 years. He had no place which he called a home as for years he had seen nothing of his Step Mother and he looked on this place where he lodged, Mrs Stafford's house, as his home.

John Bettles whose letter is enclosed was his fellow lodger – they both worked for the same firm.

Mrs Stafford tells me that Bowyer said to her that he wished her and her husband to have all that belonging to him if he should not come back. I believe Mrs Stafford to be a conscientious person who would not make any such statement had she no grounds, and Bettles whose letter is enclosed is also to be depended on.

Yours Truly
W. G. A. Coldwell

.....

Main St, Islip, Thrapston

Sir, in reply to your letter of 25 inst with reference to the late Pte F H Bowyer.

I must state I distinctly heard him say on the morning that he went away on Aug 5/7th to Mrs Stafford if I never come back you need not trouble about anyone, every thing is yours and I also heard him say on the Sunday previous that if I do have to go Mrs Stafford I shall make my Will in your favour. He said keep a home for me however long I am gone which ever way it is I shall reward you, remain yours respectfully

J Bettles
Know on [sic] else was present. J Bettles
Witness - W G A Coldwell 2nd Bn Northamptonshire Regt.

.....

April 5 [1915]
Main St, Islip, Nr Thrapston

Sir
In answer to your letter of last week I am sorry to say I am not in possession of any papers expressing the wish of the late F H Bowyer no 8451 1st Batt Royal Fus. His exact words were as he left

Private Frank Henry Bowyer – 1st Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment) L/8451

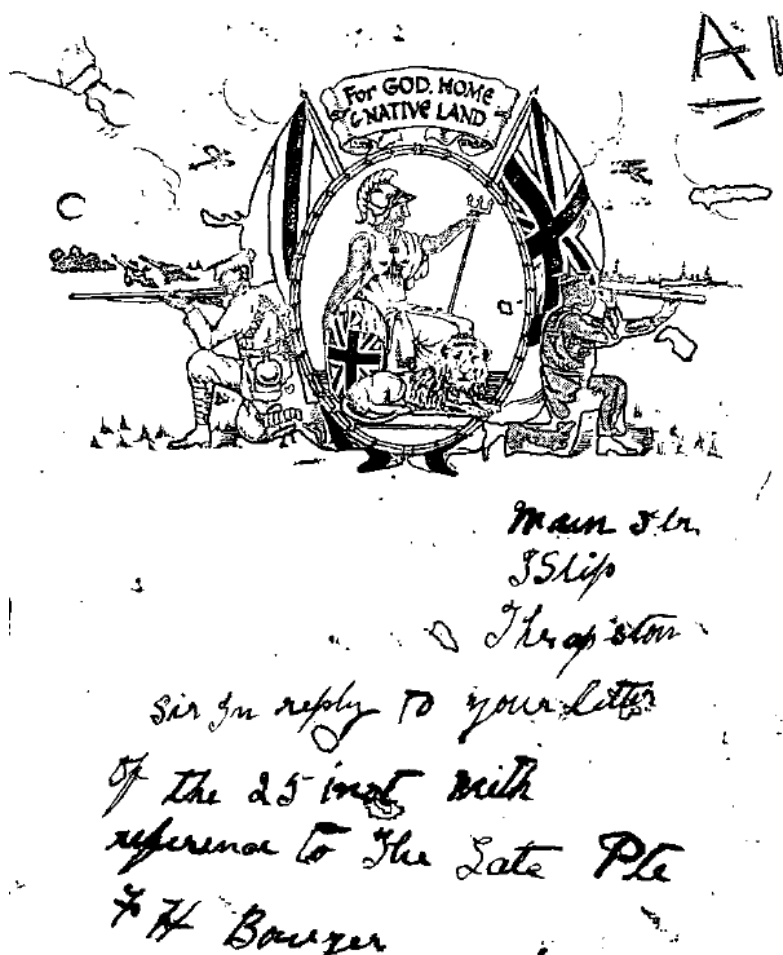
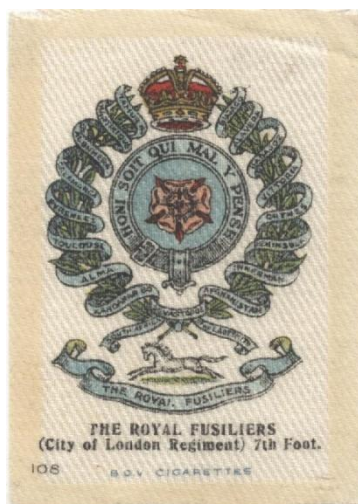
this house on the Wednesday morning following bank holiday in the presence of our other lodger Mr J Bettles if I never come back again everything belongs to you don't trouble anybody else about anything. He says you have done more [for] me Mrs Stafford than anyone [h]as ever done, & I hope there will be a home kept here for me which of course both I & my Husband promised to do. He never even corresponded with any one else. He also said he should make his Will in my favour, trusting to hear from you again.

Sir, I remain yours respectfully
Mrs W Stafford

.....

Right: The highly patriotic letter heading used by John Bettles in his letter given above.

Below: Silk badge of the Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment) from a contemporary cigarette packet.



Additional Note – William Frederick Charles Bowyer (Frank's older brother)

Frank's older brother, William Frederick, also served in the military having enlisted in the Middlesex Regiment at Hounslow on 16th November 1899. He served in India and the East Indies between 1901 and 1910 before returning and serving in the UK. He was mobilised on 5th August 1914 and served with the B.E.F. from the outbreak of war earning the 1914 Star as a result. He was promoted to Corporal and later acting Sergeant, and was lucky to survive the war being discharged in May 1919.



© N B Stickells Nov 2014.