



As the first in a series of special supplements Thame Remembers are pleased to reproduce a letter from a Thame man serving at the Western Front one hundred years ago (first published in the Thame Gazette on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1915).

William Noel Smith was born in Basingstoke, Hampshire in 1892 to Emma E and William Smith. The family moved to Thame, firstly to Chinnor Road, and then to Elmdene, Essex Road, and he attended Lord Williams Grammar School. On leaving school he joined his father in the family printers and stationery business in Upper High Street,



also enlisting in 1912 with the 4th Battalion (Territorial Force) of the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry, which was mobilised on 5th August 1914. On the afternoon of 13th June 1916,

whilst in a carrying party taking tea to his comrades in trenches at Hebuterne, north of Albert, a shell burst close by, and he was killed, aged 24. He was buried nearby in what is now the Hebuterne Military Cemetery. His mother, upon the death of his father in 1914 moved back to Hampshire. He is remembered on the town war memorial, and also the memorial boards for St Mary's, All Saints, and Lord Williams's School.



A Thame Remembers Cross was placed on his grave on 18<sup>th</sup> April 2015 by Cliff Baker.

THAME GAZETTE JUNE 22, 1915

WITH THE TERRITORIALS

We have received the following letter from Pte W N Smith, who is with the Thame Territorials at the Front.

*British Expeditionary Force*

*Monday, June 13th*

*"It must be almost two months since I last wrote, so perhaps a few more notes on the doings of the 4th Oxford's may be interesting. At that time we had just taken over trenches in a large dense wood, which we held till a week back; then we had a few days so called "rest" change of work would be a better description and three days ago came into a new line of trenches from which I am now writing. The writer of an article in a large 'daily' has pointed out that the wood we were holding played a leading part in the opening months of the war, changing hands several times before being finally taken by our troops. Many grim reminders of the severeness of the fighting are to be seen: dotted singly and in groups all through the wood are large numbers of those little mounds which mark the resting place of gallant men. Thanks to the care bestowed by the troops who have held the woods most of the graves are well kept up, railed off and with a neat cross. We have ourselves whilst extending the trenches found poor fellows who had, no doubt been hastily covered over, and have done our best to mark where they lie. Caved in trenches and dugouts, ruins of houses and shell shattered trees all speak of those days. Times are pretty lively in the wood and one must accept as inevitable an ever increasing list of casualties which has risen from three to near fifty; among the fatalities was Lieut. Herman Hodge (son of a former M P for our division), killed whilst sniping. Almost daily some part of the wood is shelled and a village on the edge of it, has been much knocked about; the church and civic hospital are complete ruins and almost every house shows signs of bombardment. We have had several 'stack ups' and on the night when the battle for a now famous hill (it is no longer a hill) was raging, we were on for hours giving the 'Huns' rapid fire, whilst our artillery was also going strong; in retaliation, hails of bullets and grenades*

The 1st/4th Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry was a territorial battalion which was part of the 48th (South Midland) Division. It was mobilised for full time war service on 5<sup>th</sup> August 1914, and had moved to Essex by mid August 1914. On 13<sup>th</sup> March 1915 the Division was warned to prepare for overseas service and went via Folkestone-Boulogne. By 3<sup>rd</sup> April the Division had concentrated near Cassel in northern France. From April to mid June they were at Ploegsteert (Plug Street), west of Ypres and the wood referred to is Plugstreet Wood. The town referred to is probably Nieppe (in France) which is where they went for R & R (rest and recuperation) and baths in the huge vats of the old brewery.

It was at Pont de Nieppe, where they were reviewed by the new Divisional Commander Maj Gen Fanshawe on 10 June. He was also from Thame.

It is likely that it was after the review, or during the days beforehand, that Smith was able to have a 'wander round'. Soon afterwards the battalion started to move south into France before ending up at Hebuterne, Somme where they were based for 12 months.

**The other persons mentioned in the letter are:**

**Sgt William Edward Roberts** of the Queens Own Oxfordshire Hussars who was killed by a sniper's bullet in Ypres on 28<sup>th</sup> May 1915, age 30. He is buried at Bedford House Cemetery Ypres, where a Thame Remembers Cross will be placed.

**Billy Ladbrook:** Private William Ladbrook, was wounded in Aug 1916 and later joined the Tank Corps. He survived the war.

**Paddy Eaton:** Private Ralph Eaton, stayed with the Oxford and Bucks and died on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1916 on the Somme, age 21. He is buried at Martinpuich British Cemetery, France, where a Thame Remembers Cross will be placed.

**2nd Lt John Percival Hermon-Hodge** died on 28<sup>th</sup> May 1915, at the age of 24, in the Ypres salient, an exposed part of the British front lines which projected deep into enemy territory. His grave is at Rifle House Cemetery, "Plugstreet" near to Ypres. He was from Wyfold Court, Oxon and therefore not remembered in Thame.

*came back, and we quite expected to get the order to go over the parapet at daybreak. While the fight was on it was a continuous roar of thunder-like magnitude. Many nights we have been fetched to the parapet as signs of activity had been observed in the enemy trenches some 100 yards away. Two days before we left the wood we were shelled and I have two bits of shrapnel which came through our tent and fell close by my side; that morning our rear guard had a close shave when a shell fell within 2 yards of the sentry and failed to explode; of 40 shells which fell nearly all exploded with but this exception. Our time was divided between the firing line and the supports and we have had a pretty good dose of sand bagging and other fatigue work. Well shall I remember where a ration fatigue was going up to the firing trenches, a Maxim got on us; the opening shots whizzing over warned us to get prone, and then a hail of bullets swept up and down our line striking the earth a few yards on our far-side and well, here we are. Two Thame lads have had bits of 'nerves'; whilst reading and leaning against a post a bullet nearly missed Billy Ladbrook and shattered the post over his head, and Pte R Eaton (Paddy) had a piece of cloth taken from his tunic's sleeve by a shrapnel bullet. After seven weeks in this wood we had four days doing drill etc. near a large town, where for the first time since I left England, I had a wander round and had a chat to some of the folk. The three days we have been in these trenches nothing much has happened; this morning an attempt was made to blow up a portion of the trench to our right, but the enemy miscalculated the distance; the report and the explosion shook the trench and brought us quickly to the parapet ready for an emergency. The trenches are very massive as we are subject to a cross fire, bullets coming over from three directions. The weather has been most summerlike, a while in the wood the mosquitoes were a great annoyance; now we are free from this pest and have dropped our 'Gott staffe mosquito' cry. All the Thame lads were extremely sorry to hear that Sergt W E Roberts had been killed in action, the Gazette with the news came last Friday.*

*With kindest regards Wm N Smith"*