

JOHN FREDERICK PARSELL

PRIVATE 2366, 1ST BATTALION, HERTFORDSHIRE REGIMENT.

KILLED IN ACTION: SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 10TH 1916, AGED 18.

BURIED: KNIGHTSBRIDGE CEMETERY, MESNIL-MARTINSART, SOMME, FRANCE. REF. F. 28.

BORN IN STOTFOLD, BEDFORDSHIRE, LIVED AND ENLISTED IN PIRTON.



John was the son of John and Sarah Parsell. The first Pirton records found that include him is the 1911 census. That gives the birth places for John (senior) and Sarah as Wormley, Essex and Guilden Morden, Cambridgeshire respectively and Stotfold, Bedfordshire for young John. He was just thirteen and so was born around 1898. It also lists Katherine Maude and his elder sister and she had been born in Stapleford, Herts. John (senior) was working as a Shepherd. The same census confirms that they had three children, but that one had died. From this information it is possible to find the family in 1901, when they were living in Aston, Hertfordshire, John (senior) was now a cattle stockman on a local farm. This census reveals the third child, and their eldest son, William G. He was then eight and born in Bennington, Hertfordshire.

They had clearly moved around the area and as John (senior) worked on farms - he moved to where the work was. They clearly moved to Pirton sometime after the 1901 census and certainly in time for John to attend the school as he is listed on the School Memorial.

Newspaper articles reveal that before the war John (junior) had begun working at Timothy White's chemist shop in Hitchin, where his services were 'highly appreciated'. He was one of Pirton contingent who joined the Hertfordshire Territorials - John joining in February 1914. In fact he was at camp with them when war was declared. At sixteen he was too young to serve and had to wait until July 1915 to go to France and even then would have been too young officially. The Parish Magazine records that he was one of the men who '*had come forward to uphold the honour of our King and Country*' and was with the 1st Battalion of the Hertfordshire Regiment.

John wrote home from Hertford, presumably in late 1914, he was pleased that the Pirton soldiers are not forgotten '*I am very happy and comfortable and getting on well*' he wished all a '*Happy Christmas*'.



Private John Frederick Parsell

If he joined up with the Battalion in July 1915, then he was probably in the draft of seventy men plus one officer who arrived from England on the 14th. Two other Pirton men*1, Arthur Walker and Harry Smith were already serving with the 1st Hertfordshires, and had been since the November 1914, John would have known both.

At that time two of the Hertfordshire companies were in the front lines at Cunchy and two held in reserve. The men being alternated every 48 hours, so John would have been in the frontline very soon after arriving. They were relieved on the 21st and marched Montmorency barracks, near Bethune. The period to the end of August was spent in and out of the trenches, turn and turnabout with the Coldstream Guards.

John fought for a year with the pattern often dangerously similar, in and out of the trenches, trench warfare and shelling. He would have been part of, or seen and heard much of the following

action, which is extracted from the Battalion's War Diary.

On September 25th 1915 they were supporting the 1st Kings who attacked the German trenches. They were cut to pieces by machine gun fire and the Hertfords were ordered not to advance. On the 27th they launched a gas attack on the Germans, but it had little effect so they did not follow it up. In fact the diary suggests that it was a failure with two officers and a number of other ranks wounded or gassed – presumably the wind changed. In December they suffered unusually heavy shelling, but were lucky enough to be in Bethune away from the Front for

Christmas Day.

January 1916 saw 126 new drafts arrive, presumably making good some of the losses and for the period between January and September they continued spent most of their time in and out of the



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Rank and Initials *P. P.*
Regiment *1st Hertfordshire Regt.*
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ARTHUR WALKER

PRIVATE 2364, 1ST BATTALION, HERTFORDSHIRE REGIMENT.
DIED OF WOUNDS: MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 18TH 1916, AGED 23.
BURIED: BOULOGNE EASTERN CEMETERY, RUE DE DRINGEN,
PAS DE CALAIS, FRANCE. REF. VIII. C. 143.
BORN, LIVED AND ENLISTED IN PIRTON.

Arthur Walker is the man mentioned in the previous chapter on John Parsell, who died from the wounds received in the same shell explosion.

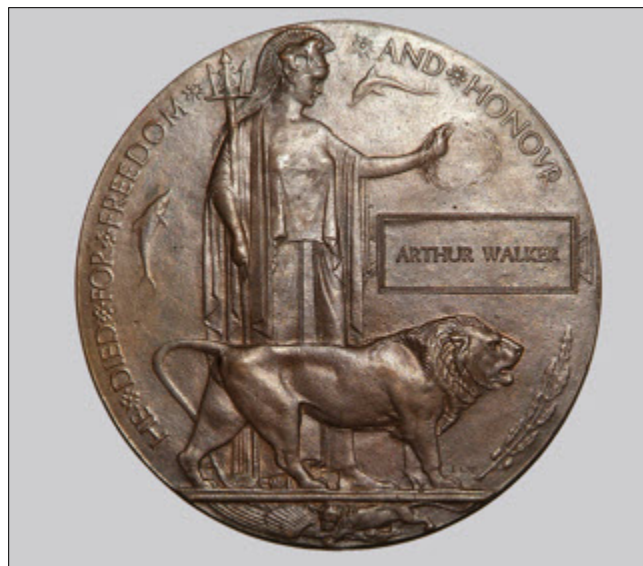
Arthur was born on November 13th 1892. The Commonwealth War Grave Commission records confirm him to be the son of George and Sarah Walker of Pirton and husband of Mrs A. Walker of Pirton. George and Sarah Walker (née Odell) had seven children, John (bapt-1868), Alice (bapt-1871), Frederick (bapt-1882), Gertrude (bapt-1885), Sidney (b-1888), Herbert (b-1890) and Arthur (b-1892). In all four brothers served; Arthur who is featured here and Frederick, Sidney and Herbert, who all survived.

The family lived in Bury End, near Great Green, and like his elder brothers, Sidney and Herbert, Arthur attended the Pirton School and appears on its war memorial. George worked as farm labourer and Sarah a strawplaiter, but they knew nothing of the war or the service of their sons because they died before the war; Sarah at fifty nine in March 1907 and George at sixty four in 1911.

Sidney married a girl called Susan sometime around 1908, and moved out of the family home. Herbert remained and in the 1911 census is listed as the head of the household with Gertrude and Arthur still living there. Arthur was working as a labourer on one of the local farms.

He was another Pirton born man and another in the Hertfordshire Territorials and signed his attestation papers for them in February 1914, six months before the war. He was twenty one at that time and an agricultural worker, working for Mr Knowles at Oughton Head, near Hitchin.

When war came the Territorials were only obliged to undertake home defence duties, but Arthur, like a number of other 'Pirton Terriers' volunteered, and he signed papers agreeing to overseas service with 1st Battalion of the Hertfordshire Regiment on



Arthur Walker's next of kin memorial plaque, more commonly known as the 'death penny'.

August 31st 1914. Before leaving for France he became friendly with a Pirton girl called Rose Males.

He embarked for France on November 5th 1914 and the Battalion war diary records that just before embarkation they were issued with the new, short magazine, Lee Enfield rifles. They arrived at Le Havre and marched to rest camp before moving to St. Omer by train and then motor bus to Vlametinghe in Belgium, arriving on the 11th. They came under shrapnel fire as they marched through Ypres and two men were slightly wounded. The next day, whilst bivouacked, another shell landed, but fortunately it failed to explode. On the 14th they moved into the trenches for the first time and their first death in action occurred on the 18th - it rapidly got worse the next day eight men were killed and more wounded.

They were only in Ypres briefly and quickly moved to France where the Hertfordshires saw a great deal of their action. They fought in the trenches around Bethune - Givenchy, Cuinchy, Vermelles, names that mean much to students of the war. This whole area, along with great swathes of France, was a fierce battlefield and by the end of the war, towns and the

Harry was the son of an Offley man*1, Henry Charles Crawley and a Pirton woman Minnie Cherry. They married sometime around 1882. Henry worked as a farm labourer and then a horse keeper and by 1911 they had ten children, although one had died. The children were, Harry (b-1881 or 1882), Annie Jane (bapt-1885), Albert Vincent (b-1886), Florence Rose (b-1888), Alice (b-1891), Helen (b-1891), Millie, Ellen or Eleanor? (b-1893), Katie or Kate (b-1895), Frank (b-1896) and Phillip (b-1902). They lived at Middle Farm on Crabtree Lane roughly where 16 Crabtree Lane is today.

After leaving Pirton School, Harry followed in his father's footsteps to become a horse keeper. Probably, as the Parish Magazine report appearing here suggests, for Mr Thomas Franklin of Walnut Tree Farm.

When war came, Harry was still living with his mother in Middle Farm, his father had died sometime between 1911 and 1915, and on December 9th 1915 he enlisted. His brother Frank also heard the 'call to arms' and followed him, sometime between March 2nd and July 1916. Frank survived the war.

Although he joined the 5th Battalion of the Bedfordshire Regiment, he was transferred to the 6th Battalion of the Leicestershire Regiment at some point. They were another service battalion formed for the duration of the war and to train Lord

Kitchener's first wave of men raised for the war. They were ordered to France and landed on July 29th 1915, but Harry did not go to France until December 10th 1916 and it was on December 21st that he joined his new Battalion in the field.

They were at Auchel in northern France and out of the line, so Harry had a quiet start. The Battalion had Christmas dinner together, in the local theatre, and on New Years Eve the Battalion band played the old year out. On January 27th they were due to go back into the trenches, but that order was cancelled and instead they were ordered to move to the area round Hazebrouck. They marched to Lillers, caught a train to Proven in Belgium, about thirty miles to the north, and then marched the three miles to Houtkerque. Which is about fifteen miles from Ypres and quite probably they were being held in reserve and despite their Commanding Officer reconnoitring the defences they did not go into action. Instead, on February 14th they went back to France, first Chocques and then to Bethune and by the 18th they were in the Lancashire trench at Noyelles. The war diary for the 22nd to the 25th describes their activity as 'Normal trench warfare. One wounded on 22nd &



Private Harry Crawley's Medals and Memorial Plaque

