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MY ADVENTURES WHILST SERVING WITH THE  
COLOURS DURING THE GREAT WAR  
1914 – 1918

Private Walter Blackwell, no. 14732.  
10th (S) Sherwood Foresters, D. Company, 15th Platoon, 51st Brigade, 17th Division, General  
Pilches, 3rd Army, under General Plumber

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## CONTENTS

Introduction by Betty Quinton (Née Blackwell), Walter Blackwell's Niece	7
Editor's Introduction	9
'A Scrap of Paper'	11
My Adventures Whilst Serving with the Colours	12
Military Mining in the First World War	26

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## INTRODUCTION

Walter Blackwell was the ninth son of William Henry and Anne Blackwell. They lived at what is now 25 Wales Road, Kiveton Park. Walter and his brothers left school at an early age and followed their father to work at the Colliery.

In 1914, when the war started, the prospect of travel and a different lifestyle must have been very exciting to a young man like Walter who had never left Kiveton before. However, it proved to be a horrendous experience which would finally cost him his life.

He tells his story of life in the trenches in France up to the time that he was badly wounded and of his many months in various hospitals. He then attempted to get back to some kind of a normal life at home, but as a badly wounded soldier who had given all for King and country, he was finally abandoned and his war pension was withdrawn completely by the authorities.

The owners of Kiveton Park Coal Company kept their word to returning soldiers and made a job for Walter as a cycle attendant at the colliery. My father, Marquis, and his brothers, set up a cycle repair shop in a shed in a garden at home, where Walter mended punctures and repaired cycles for local people.

Walter died of his wounds in 1926 and although I was born some years later, I can still remember this shed in the garden at my grandma's house. It was still fitted out ten years later with all the equipment for repairing cycles - a permanent memorial for Walter.

My father and his brothers fought long and hard for Walter's pension and all the letters were kept safely. After my father died, and my mother came to live with us, she brought all these documents with her. When she died, and I was sorting through her things, I was amazed to find Walter's story and all that had happened to him.

Now, thanks to Dr. John Tanner, Walter's story has become an archive. The story of a miner born and bred in Kiveton, who became a soldier, only to die from wounds inflicted in battle in the Great War.

Betty Quinton (nee Blackwell), Walter's Niece

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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

This account tells us a great deal about what it would have been like for the miners and other men of Kiveton Park and Wales who went to fight in the trenches of the First World War, many of whose names are tragically recorded on the war memorials at the Colliery Offices and Wales Square. The men of Kiveton Park and Wales served in many different theatres of war, from the trenches of the Western Front to the icy waters of the Baltic. Walter served in France and his mining background meant he became a Sapper, mining not for coal but making tunnels deep into the earth beneath the German trenches in which explosives could be placed.

From what we know, Walter wrote this account based on his diaries, although the diaries have not survived. The account was then typed by his family. We've made only very slight changes to Walter's prose, a couple of full-stops here and there to ensure his sentiments are conveyed in the clearest way. We've split the account into paragraphs where appropriate. Walter had a strange habit of using the imperfect tense rather than the past tense, but we have left this in place except where it confused the meaning. Similarly, during several passages, the tense alternates between the past and present. We have left this as in the original, as, although probably not deliberately, it seems to convey the increasing pace and pressures of his time in the trenches. Dr. Tim Brooks has kindly contributed an article about mining in the trenches, which Walter was involved in towards the end of his time in France.

We would like to thank archivists at Rotherham Borough Archives, Sheffield Archives, the Notts and Derby (Sherwood Foresters) Regimental Archive and military historians who have contributed information and advice. Our thanks go to Sarah Wickham of Rotherham Borough Archives for reading this transcript and offering valuable insights. Appreciation to the History Club at Wales High School for their efforts in researching the fates of the village's servicemen. Considerable thanks goes to Holly Greenhalgh for designing this book. Most of all, thanks go to Betty Quinton (née Blackwell) and her family, for bringing to our attention what is both an unusual and fascinating account of a miner's time in the trenches.



John Tanner

Project Manager, Kiveton Park and Wales Community History Project

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“A Scrap of Paper”

It's only a 'Scrap of Paper'  
I'm sending now to you,  
But the message that it carries,  
is loyal, straight and true.

It will say my heart is with you  
In the fight across the sea;  
It will wish you luck and glory,  
And a safe return to me?

And you'll know my love and friendship  
Will ever be the same,  
For a 'Scrap of Paper's' priceless  
When it bears a Briton's name.

G.M.L.

Sent to his mother by 14732, Pte Walter Blackwell,  
Sherwood Foresters (Notts & Derby)

## SERVING WITH THE COLOURS

Enlisted on the 3rd of September 1914, at the recruiting meeting held in St John's rooms, joining the Lincolnshire Regiment. There were eighty-nine of us who enlisted on this particular day, and volunteered into the same regiment, all from Kiveton Park and District.



Marching to War: Kiveton Park, September 1914

On the 5th September, Saturday, we had instructions to proceed to Derby Barracks, and we all marched to the Kiveton Station, headed by the band, leaving about 2pm and having a good send off, but little expecting such a cool reception when we arrived at Derby.

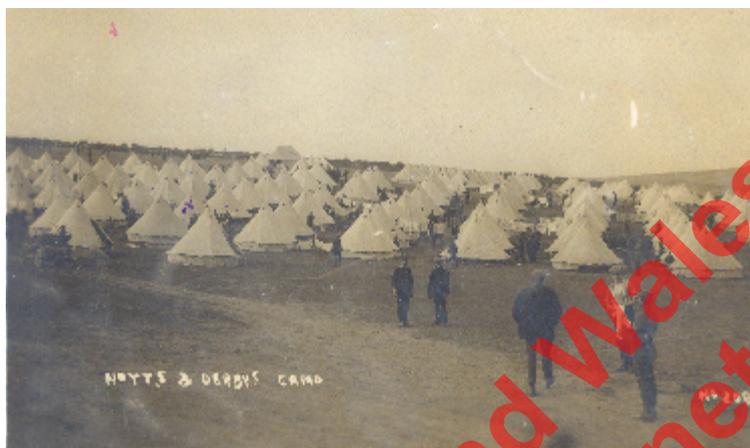
On arrival at the Barracks, we found them crowded out. The Sergeant Major came up to us in a very sarcastic manner, and wanted to know where the \*\*\*\*\* we had come from, he told us to go where we liked, as there was no room for us. Well, some slept on the station, others in fields, or anywhere they could get. I for myself got lodgings in Derby, and did not go near the Barracks anymore until Monday morning. We then received instruction to prepare for going to some unknown destination.



About fifteen hundred men left Peartree Station, Derby, on the 7th September, Monday, about 7 o'clock at night. We travelled by special train through the night and arrived at Wool, in Dorsetshire, about 5 o'clock in the morning, and it was raining in torrents, no doubt about it, it was a lively spot about twelve miles from nowhere. We then marched about three miles from the station and arrived at Bovington Camp.

It appeared to us nothing less than a wilderness, being more or less surrounded by large woods and plantations. Here we began to realise the first hardships of a soldier's life, we slept on the grass for two nights before receiving any tents to sleep in, and to mend matters nothing much to eat. We gathered some blackberries and nuts from the woods, and feeling the pinch of hunger several of us from Kiveton

set out on an expedition to see if we could find any houses. After tramping several miles we came across a small cottage, then we began to think we had struck it lucky, but much to our surprise, it was the house of a farm labourer. After a little conversation we found out that they could not supply us with anything to eat, for they only received sixteen shillings a week in wages, and it was only a matter of a mere existence for the people who lived down there. Anyway, the good lady told us they had plenty of potatoes in the garden, and we could have some if we only dig them up, so we eagerly set about digging up the potatoes, and the lady of the house boiled them for us. There's no doubt about it, we all enjoyed them, having had a good fill we paid her well for her trouble, and they had our sympathy in only just managing to keep themselves.



*Bovington Camp, Walter's tent marked with a cross*

terrible, raining mostly all the time, it was nothing to go without breakfast as the cook-house was often washed away.

We had now been in the army about four months, and had not received any clothing of any description, some of the men had to stay in their tents because their boots had given out, all our clothing in fact was in a shocking condition with marching through the mud and water, and the ordeal here had got to a most trying nature. One night during the beginning of December 1914, the Border Regiment, who had been stationed nearby, had broken out in disorder. They came across our tents and let them down, demanding the Notts and Derby to stand by them against the conditions they were all up against. Anyway, this uproar finally brought things to light for we received orders to move back to Bovington Camp, where huts had been built, and no doubt we had been under canvas longer than the Army Regulations allowed. Here again, our training became more severe, and it was nothing to set out early in the morning about seven o'clock and have a full day skirmishing over the Plains, a matter of about eighteen miles a day, and mostly arriving back at five o'clock. Our first course of firing was at a place called Morten, being about three miles from Camp.

We stayed at Bovington until April 17th 1915, and than going back to Lulworth Cove,

and again under canvas. We had not been long stationed here when men were picked out who were to have khaki, having now been in the Army seven months, and only receiving our first issue of clothes. There were odd ones who had worn their civilian clothes out and had been given Kitchener's Blue. We stayed here until 26th May 1915. They then found out that a portion of Kitchener's Army, which we termed 'lost and strayed', as we had not seen much of civilisation for about eight months, being in an unknown part of England, and about twelve miles from nowhere. On the 26th May a memorable day for us, we commenced on a seventy-eight mile march to Winchester, to Flower Down Camp. We marched roughly about fifteen miles a day and sleeping in the open fields at night. The Brigade all joined forces here and it was a wonderful sight to behold. We marched through Ringwood, Swanage and the New Forest, then on to Luton three miles from Southampton.



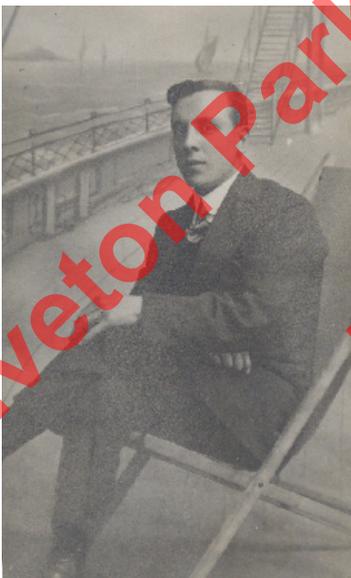
Arthur Blackwell, Walter's Brother

Our stay at Winchester did not last very long, only a few weeks and then we received orders to proceed to France. The time spent at Winchester being of a most cheerful nature. We were allowed to go into town every night, except when doing guard or picket duty. When the order came through for us to go to France, trouble arose in camp, for we were dispatched, all our equipment, and everything in readiness for going, but the soldiers did not let that come about. All the battalions surrounded the headquarters and demanded to see the Colonel, and we had no more parades until someone came down from London and we finally got forty-eight hours leave, not much time when you have to travel 150 miles each way to your home. On 27th June 1915, we held our last church parade in England, held in Winchester Cathedral.

On 14th July 1915, we left Flower Down Camp, Winchester, for France. We embarked from Folkestone and arrived at Boulogne in the early hours of the morning on the 15th where we stayed until night time. We then went forward up the line to St. Omer, the journey done in cattle trucks, about forty in each truck, very uncomfortable, for when we got into a position we had to stay until arrival at St Omer, and some found it very difficult to walk after the journey. We then commenced a march to the country place named Ebbingham, where we billeted in farm buildings for about five days, here we found out a little of the inhabitants' ways. The old lady started grouching about the use of the water, so we even had to do sentry over the pump. Afterwards, leaving here, we commenced a long march of about 130 miles, reaching our destination at the end of July, the place being named Reninghalte, a pretty little town, and making this our Divisional Headquarters. Here in France, we had our first church parade, and during

the night of the 1st August 1915, when we were all asleep, a dispatch rider rode up at about 12pm and we had to turn out, as they were expecting a big German attack. We started on a forced march, which means continually walking without a rest, and whilst we were marching, 'No Smoking, No Talking', was passed along the line.

Eventually, owing to being misled, or something which was never known to us, we had to take cover under a wood, owing to it just breaking daylight, and being on an open road, and under observation of the enemy, we had formed a good target for them. Luckily, it was a wonder that we did not get a terrible artillery bombardment. We stayed under the wood until dusk, and after our long march, we slept without taking off our packs, or anything else, deadbeat to the wide. We set off again from here, and arrived at a place named Flemintines, where we stayed in huts. No sooner had we got down to rest, when the Germans started bombarding the huts for all they were worth. We had to clear out in a hurry, and leave our belongings, except rifles and ammunition, and never got them back again. The following day we went back into more huts and we had better luck this time, and during our stay here we went out at nights making trenches around Dickie Bush, which was very lively at times, what with snipers and shells of every description. On the 3rd August 1915 we were trenching all night at Dickie Bush, the weather being fine for us. The 4th, and 5th, of August 1915 we were again on the same work but it was raining. The 6th August we were doing trenching in Scottish Wood and the weather fine. It was here we received our first casualties. We continued making trenches, and fixing wire entanglements, until 15th August.



Walter on holiday in happier times

Whilst at the town of Reninghalts, we had our last church parade before going over for our first baptism of fire. The Brigade on that Sunday Morning consisting of the Borders, Notts and Derby, Lincolns and Staffs. The church was filled to its utmost capacity and it was a most impressive and beautiful service. All the healthy young faces remarking quietly to themselves, 'I am prepared to do my duty, though even now I may be marked by the Hand of Death'. The hymn 'O GOD OUR HELP IN AGES PAST' was never sung with greater fervour, and the simple words spoken by the Chaplin had surely never before had such power. No one can really imagine such a sight, and the thoughts that run through the minds of the men.

Our first experience of being in the trenches was in the front of St. Eloi Mount, and on the left of Kemmell, the first day being fairly quiet. The 18th August, I and several more were chosen for barricade guard on a road which was of course sand-bagged, and we were not allowed, or even dare, look over the top, only through potholes. Afterwards,



*Kiveton Park Colliery Cricket Club, c. 1912, with Walter on the back row, second from right*

we went back in the trenches, and we soon found out the Germans were deadly snipers. On one day one sniper had broken no less than fifty periscopes, and at the same time, the Germans were continually

bombarding our lines, with no reply from our artillery, for they were rationed for shells. It was nothing for our artillery to fire about six rounds then be finished for the day, the Germans in return giving us about three hours or so continual shelling. At night we were out on listening post or mending wire entanglements. On one particular night, two more men and myself got lost in no-man's land, and we had to stay in shell holes until morning. Eventually, we reached our lines again and, fortunately for us, it was a foggy morning, as we found ourselves right close on the German trenches, and there is no doubting it, had it not been for the fog, we should have never got back again. Every night the officer seemed to have me spotted to go out into no-mans land, either on patrol or scouting. During our stay in the trenches the weather had been fine, but the day previous to coming out we had a surprise, for in the early hours of the morning, the Germans made an attack. They came over in thousands, just like spring onions. We eventually held them at bay, and not one of them reached our lines, hundreds lay in no-mans land, our casualties being very small.



*Sherwood Foresters camped in France (thanks to the Regimental Archive)*

On 27th August 1915 we got relieved, after doing twelve days in the trenches. I shall never forget that march back. We got relieved at 12 o'clock midnight, and marched twelve miles to our rest camp, marching forty minutes in every hour, men dropping in the road exhausted, beat to the wide, for we had done practically twelve days without sleep, we dropped ssleep for about ten minutes with pack and

everything on. We arrived back in camp somewhere about 6 o'clock in the morning, don't forget we did not sleep. It was Saturday night when we got relieved, and Sunday

when we arrived in camp, but Sunday made no difference out there. We had only been back in camp for about four hours when I was chosen for trenching in Scottish Wood. The Germans had broken the communication trenches down, and in the army they always take duties in alphabetical order, and that always makes you in for it when your name commences with the letter B. However, Germans spotted us whilst on duty in the wood, and some of the men got wounded; I myself got buried with a shell, but was able to get out of it myself.



*Kiveton Park Colliery Football Club, c. 1913, with Walter on the back row, second from right*

I was out of the trenches for about four days, and then went trenching at Sanctuary Wood and it rained all through the night. On the 1st September, it continued raining and the Germans were going mad. The 2nd September, still raining in torrents and very near waist deep in water, this completing my first year's service. The 3rd and 4th September, 1915, we had more rain, and the Germans bombarding us very heavily and during the day I was put on out-post duty. The 6th, I was on wire entanglements, and from the 7th to the 10th, being on listening post. The 11th, we had a bombing raid, and back again to listening post duty. On the 12th and 13th, and on the 14th September, I was chosen for the support trenches in the Wood. During the day, I received a parcel from home, and I had just nicely cooked some ham, when Fritz dropped one right on the top of the fire. He shelled us in the Wood for about three hours, inflicting heavy losses on the Sherwoods, and also the Border Regiment. We were again relieved, and our losses and casualties for the fifteen days in the Wood were very heavy.

We marched six hours to our rest camp and on the 19th September, we had a church parade. General Pilcher commended us for our noble duty and also saying it would still be required for us to go back to Sanctuary Wood, a very hot place. Anyway, at this period I left the Battalion and joined the 172nd Company of Royal Engineers. The Sherwoods went back again to the trenches at Sanctuary Wood. On the 22nd Sept, I went mining in the trenches at St. Eloi, in No. 24 trenches, where we commenced sinking a new shaft. The next day, I was also mining but in No. 21 trenches, the Germans blowing our trenches up, and also on the 26th September we were blown up, four of our men being buried alive, and afterwards we had to wall around them. The Germans made a fierce



*About to leave for Liverpool, Walter, his mother and other patients*

was sent into the workings, so we had orders on the 4th October to join our Battalion at Renninghalts as the 17th Division was going down to the rest camp at Cartree. We left Hill 60 at midnight and then marched about twelve miles to camp, where we were supposed to be resting, but instead having route marches and drill all the day. On October 10th we had another church parade and on the 11th a route march of about sixteen miles, and the following day we did likewise for about twelve miles. The 13th October we had drill and bombing practice, and on the 14th route march all day. The 15th October, church parade and the three following days, 17th, 18th, 19th, we were route marching again during each day. On the 20th October we had been on a route march from 8am until 3pm, when we received orders to prepare for the trenches at 5pm.

We then marched to Flemintines, about twelve miles, and stayed there until the following day. On the 21st we again went into the trenches at Sanctuary Wood, this making the third time we had been on duty at that particular place. The 22nd I was chosen to go out mending wire entanglements and I got lost again in no-mans land, finding my way back at daybreak. The 23rd October I again left the Battalion, doing duty with the mining section at Hooge, and we had some lively encounters with the enemy. On the 25th October we made a charge, and was afterwards counter attacked and lost some trenches. The Germans captured one of our Saps, and making a wire cage over it, placed a sniper in it and he was doing some deadly sniping. On the 26th we mined underneath him and the following day we blew the whole lot up, cage and trenches. On the 26th, we had a heaving downpour of rain and the trenches were filled to knee-deep with water and dirt. The 29th the Germans bombarded the Wood and inflicted heavy losses and casualties amongst our men. The 30th, we were relieved by the Royal Engineers and went back to Flemintines and had five days rest, then going back to the Ramp parts, Ypres. We joined up with the 177th Company, Royal Engineers, and we were billeted in dug outs in the embankment of the river Yser which no shell could pierce. On the

attack at Hooge during this time, and I being chosen as one of the burying party on this occasion. On October 1st, 1915, I went mining under Hill 60, and on the first night I was listening from 6pm until 2am in a dug out in St Julien Wood. The 2nd

October, poisonous gas

7th November we were anxiously waiting for the usual transports to come along, with rations up the Menin Road, when the Germans swept the road from top to bottom with shells. I went on duty at 10pm assisting on sinking operations and under very trying conditions, the shaft being full with water, and we were drenched to the skin, and no change of clothing, with very little rations, only consisting of quarter bread and cheese. The 8th November the Germans bombarded Ypres, the Cloth Hall and Menin Road. On 9th November, 1915, I was again on the same duty, and still raining, the trenches being in very bad condition. The 10th November, I went on duty at 4pm until 1am, being subject to lively artillery duels, and are searching the communication trenches with shells. November 11th, I was working from 4pm until 1am, it was raining very hard, and the shaft getting flooded, and we were losing a lot of men going to and from the trenches during changing of the shifts. Also the Germans are getting desperate and are bombarding the town everyday.



*A shared fate - Walter with other patients and nurses in Liverpool*

The 12th November, the communication trenches unfit for travelling, all blown down and full of water, and the only way from the Sap, is down the line at the top of Menin Road and under very heavy rifle fire from snipers. November 13th, we commenced heading towards the German lines. The 14th, the Germans bombarding the fire trenches, and support trenches, and inflicting heavy losses to our troops. November 15th, getting fed up, not much food and no change after being wet through. November 16th, lively artillery dual and the Germans airmen are very daring. On November 17th, a German airman spotted us going to work and directs the artillery fire into us, searching the communication trenches, and several of our men being wounded. The 18th November, owing to casualties, and our section very low, I was on duty heading, from 5am until 2pm. The 19th, we received help from various other regiments on the 19th, the Germans bombarding the town and not leaving a house untouched. The Cloth Hall coming under heavy shell fire, and only the towers left, the following day the Germans being very quiet. On the 21st November, the trenches all fall in because of the heavy rain and shell fire. November 22nd, the enemy beginning to realise we are mining in that direction, and the trenches where we are sapping comes under heavy shell fire. They have fixed some snipers which are causing us very many losses, and the enemy are using explosive bullets, causing terrible wounds. On the 23rd Nov, we are heading towards the German lines, the enemy during the day blows up a mine on our left, but no serious damage done. November 24th, we are beginning to realise that

Ypres is the worst and hottest part of the line, they are bombarding from three hours to five hours every day. November 25th, it was snowing all the night, and we managed to get relieved from the Sap at 2am, the snipers potting at us all the way down the line, there being no rations after working, and cannot get transports up owing to severe and heavy shelling, and the Royal Engineers refusing to go to the work. On the 26th, the rations arrived sufficient to last a few days, and I was working from 5pm until 2am.



Walter supported by other patients

The following day we blew up the Germans and prepared an attack but the enemy was in large forces. 28th November, the enemy sending over gas and also gas shells. On the 29th, I was working from 8am until 6pm. The 30th November, we had not yet received any relief, and having done about twenty days without any rest. The Germans continually searching us with shells, and also for the mine shaft, using trench mortars, and practically none of our trenches left. The 1st December 1915, the Germans were sending over liquid fire, the trenches are getting unbearable, owing to the consistent shell fire. The 2nd December, our artillery getting let loose and simply poured shells into the enemy's lines, the Germans trenches are being wrecked, and then follows up bitter fighting for a shell crater. The 3rd Dec,

I was again on duty sapping from 8am until 2pm and are getting well under the German trenches, the enemy finding out where we are sapping, and are expecting getting blown up at any minute. We are getting more men for relief, as the work was more dangerous. On the 4th Dec, both artillery are strafing at each other, and the enemy are shelling Hell Fire Corner, with tear shells. The 5th Dec, I am still carrying on, and working in the mine from 2am until 10am. On the 6th Dec, all the engineers are ordered out of the saps, as we are expecting a very big attack. Dec 7th, we cannot keep going, owing to heavy losses and casualties. On the 8th Dec, only working two shifts now. The 9th Dec, I



A Royal Visit to the Wharncliffe War Hospital, Sheffield (thanks to Sheffield Local Studies)

was working again from 10am until 2pm. The 10th Dec, all the trenches were blown in and we could only get to the sap by travelling in the open. The 11th Dec, we are having to creep on our knees to try and get to the communication trenches, and they are waist deep in water. Dec 12th, I was working from 2 o'clock until 6 o'clock. On 13th, I had to give up, and sick with the heavy strain of having done about thirty-three days without any rest, or even being relieved from the trenches. Our artillery are shelling the German trenches for about three hours, and then during the night, the Germans started to sweep all Ypres with shells. Dec 14th, going to work at 10 o'clock, the trenches being wrecked.



*The Wharncliffe Hospital, since known as the Middlewood Hospital*

On the 14th Dec 1915 my fateful day, I remember going on duty at 10 o'clock, the trenches being wrecked, and unable to find the sap for the time, and after we had overcome many difficulties, we managed to find the place. Afterwards, the Germans open out with a terrific bombardment, it was just about 12 o'clock, and the position in the sap got very perilous. They dropped a shell on top of the shaft and the shaft fell in, and we were just able to get out, and on reaching the top the trenches all wrecked, and men lying in all directions. Anyway, we spotted a dug out which we entered, but we had not been in it long when the Germans dropped a gas shell on the top of it. My three fellow comrades being killed, and myself being injured and buried, and then having lost all control of myself. I remembered myself being treated at the 14th General Hospital, Boulogne, having received injuries to the back, also internal injuries and effects from gas. I should say roughly, I was pinned by wreckage, somewhere about four to five hours, before I was relieved.

I was in the 14th General Hospital, Boulogne, until the 29th December 1915. On this date I was notified that I was being sent over to Blighty, and being a stretcher case I was hoping against hope that I might be taken to a hospital, somewhere not far from my home. Anyway, I was taken on board the hospital ship (Jane Bradell) and labelled on my stretcher for Dover. On arrival at Dover I was put on the train, and at the end of the journey, I find myself at Wharncliffe War Hospital, Sheffield, being a bed patient for a considerable time. Towards the end of my stay, which was about eight months, I

was able to go with the aid of crutches. On July 14th, I was sent for treatment to the Hospital at Maghull, Liverpool, and stayed here until 16th Dec 1916, getting my final discharge from hospitals, having received treatment for nearly twelve months in the



*Kiveton Park Colliery, c. 1920s*

various hospitals. On my final discharge, I was put on a total disablement pension, from that date to receive twenty-five shillings per week.

Glad to get home, I managed for about three months, and then was again sent to Matlock on April 1st, 1917, for convalescent treatment, where I stayed until the 25th April 1917. Coming back home for about a month, and going again on the 2 June until August 25th 1917. During my stay at home, and also my visits to Matlock, after the discharge from hospitals, I had to attend Medical Boards at the Base Hospital, Sheffield, on the 10th April 1917, and also at the Hospital, Leicester, on the 24th July 1917. I was reduced to Partial Disablement Pension of 13/9 per week, from April 4th, 1917 to June 15th, 1917. After this I was put on a state pension of 5/6 per week from 21st June, 1917. The same continued until the 15th August 1917, at the end of this period my ring paper being sent in to Wakefield and the pension afterwards was paid through the Sub Pension Committee.

After my return from Matlock, I received an order that might commence some kind of work and on the Oct 1st, 1917, I went to the City of Sheffield Education Committee Handicraft Department for an interview as to learning a trade as a joiner and carpenter. I commenced to attend the Bow Street Handicraft Centre for instructions, and continued to the best of my physical condition until the 13th Nov, 1917, when I had to give up because of my disability.

On 13 December, 1917, I commenced at the Kiveton Park Colliery as a cycle attendant being unable to follow my pre-war occupation and to do any kind of labourious work. I carried on with my duty as best I could; I have the aid of a stick, my disability more or less being a source of trouble to me. I had to give up all thoughts of sport, of which I had in the past taken a very keen interest in having played with the village teams both in football and in cricket. At various periods of the year, I was called up for examinations at different hospitals, about four times a year for renewal of my pension, the same continued until 25th May, 1920, afterwards being discontinued. The latter pension being of a period of sixty-two weeks from 19th March, 1919. I would not at this time make another appeal against the unfair decision. I was determined after such methods I would do my best to carry on. Thus I managed with lapses at intervals until Dec 7th, 1925, when I eventually had to give up. The doctor ordered me to Matlock once more for a course of treatment for Neurasthenia and the leg trouble, I received no benefit for the treatment and came back home the second week in February 1926.

#### IN THE WORDS OF GEORGE BLACKWELL, WALTER'S BROTHER

He was again examined by Dr Mackenzie on the 10th February, pains being so severe with swelling that the local doctor suggested further advice in regards to his case. The specialist Mr. Mouat of Sheffield came to his home on the 12th February and he, with Dr Mackenzie, made a thorough examination, afterwards, deciding to have him taken



to Sheffield Royal Infirmary to have X-ray plates taken at the seat of the trouble. This was done on the 15th Feb 1926 and returned home again the same day to await the results. On the 20th Feb further instructions were received again, on this occasion he was retained for further examination. Finally the specialist decided it was extremely necessary

for amputation of the left leg at the hip joint. Mr Mouat the surgeon emphasizing the seriousness of his case, the agony and the pain he would have to endure. He was urged strongly that it was extremely necessary in his case to do so. He asked Walter his opinion on the matter and he said he was willing but would like to consult his brother before anything was done. I George, his brother, received a message to be at the Sheffield Royal Infirmary at the earliest possible time the following morning to talk the matter over, it was decided upon to carry out the operation the same morning, the 26th February 1926. I stayed at the hospital all the day, and also during the night, so that I might assist him in the best possible way, when he came out of the operation. He



The boy has gone with his heart aglow  
In an alien land to fight;  
The mother who bore him watched him go,  
And her trembling lips are white;  
Yet she has bidden him strike his boll  
For his king and the cause of right.

The boy, in the midst of toil and fight,  
Small time can spare for thought;  
The mother who sent him dreams all night  
Of battles he never fought;  
And see him wounded, in desperate plight,  
Or by brutal captors caught.

He takes his hardships as so much sport,  
Being for to busy to whine,  
But anxious fears at home distort  
Each peril into nine.  
The following hour' is always short.  
Tis waiting hearts that pine.

He fell at least with thousands more  
Just one of thousands slain  
On a day when the land was drenched with gore,  
From Dixmude to the Aisne.  
And he lay at peace in a world at war,  
And knew not toll or pain.

The mother who sent him bowed her head,  
And wept for the lad she bore;  
Yet she never grudge her sacred dead,  
For her countrues need was sore,  
“He died for his king and the right” she said.  
“and no man could do more.”

But the sad, proud heart of her inly bled,  
Though she showed her grief to none;  
She was just one woman who mourned her dead  
Out of many thousands – one.  
But it's better to die when the blood runs red  
Than to live when hope is done.

ERIC FITZWATER WILKINSON

# MILITARY MINING IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

TIM BROOKS

## INTRODUCTION

If people know of the military mining operations that took place under the fields of France during the First World War, it may be because they have heard of the mines that were exploded beneath the Messines Ridge at the opening of Third Battle of Ypres on 7 June 1917, causing a shockwave so massive that it was felt in London. Some will have read Sebastian Faulkes' acclaimed novel, *Birdsong*, which is set in part against a vividly described backdrop of the underground war, from the minutiae of daily life to the terror of being caught in an explosion and buried alive. Some will have seen, most recently, newspaper reports of archaeologists' plans to reopen and investigate some of the extensive underground dugout systems that provided a home to thousands of Allied troops, and which were abandoned as the war came to an end in 1918.

Mining had three distinct purposes. First, mines were dug under the enemy's lines, filled with explosive, and detonated as part of the Allies' offensive operations. Second, mines were dug as defensive measures, to counter enemy mining operations. Third, mining was used to create deep, safe dugout complexes in which soldiers could take shelter. Before we examine each of these uses of mining in turn, we shall briefly survey the development of military mining on the Western Front, both in terms of the development of mining units and in the impact the geology of the area had upon it.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF MILITARY MINING

Walter Blackwell served in the mines in the earliest days of the organised underground war. Very little provision had been made for mining before the outbreak of war. The Royal Engineers (R.E.) did not have any specialist mining units on its books, and occasional R.E. training in mine warfare followed a pattern which had remained largely unchanged for nearly fifty years. Some mining work was carried out, organised locally, using men with mining experience plucked from their infantry units to join Brigade Mining Sections, which were finally disbanded early in 1916; their short, shallow tunnels were rudimentary affairs by comparison with the deep, extensive constructions

the Royal Engineers were responsible for later in the war.



*Kiveton Park girls raising money for Belgian evacuees, c. 1915*

Specialist R.E. units, the Tunnelling Companies, were formed from February 1915. Even then some of the mining equipment that was initially supplied dated back to the Crimean War. The decision to create the Tunnelling Companies, formed largely from the ranks of civilian miners, recruited in Britain, and who had little or no military experience or training before they arrived on the Western Front, was prompted by German mining activity in late 1914 and the realisation that the war would not be over by Christmas. Many of the recruits were “clay-kickers”, men skilled in a special method of mining suited to clay soils and confined spaces, where picks and shovels could not easily be swung. The Tunnelling Companies worked best when they were supported by large working parties of infantrymen, who were used to remove spoil from the tunnels, and to ensure that the water pumps and ventilation systems were operating properly. It seems most likely, given his description of his work in the mines, that Walter served in this capacity, his background as a Kiveton Park Colliery miner being coincidental; he arrived in France after the first Tunnelling Companies had been formed, the impetus to form new Brigade Mining Sections had been reduced; and recruitment for the Tunnelling Companies was not focussed on men who had coal-mining experience like Walter, because of the geology of the ground in which the war mines were being dug. Geology and its impact on War

## UNDERGROUND

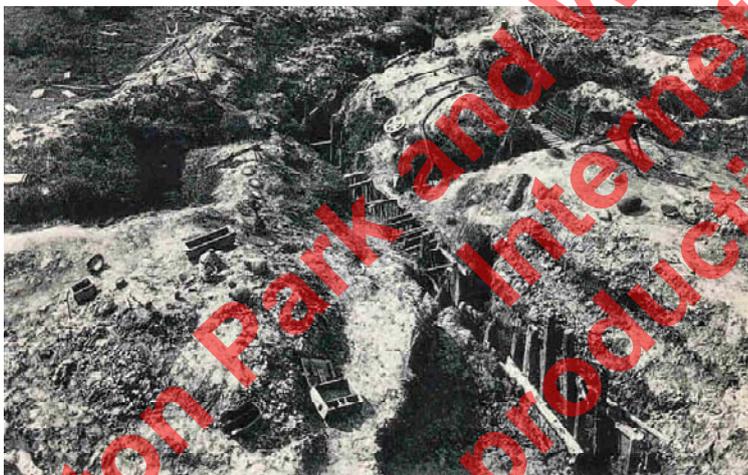
The British sector of the Western Front was divided in two by the Vimy Ridge, an important area of high ground that also marked the boundary between the clay geology of Flanders to the north, and the chalk limestone to the south-west. Mining in the chalk allowed the creation of galleries which were largely self-supporting and could be excavated to a size allowing men to work comfortably. But digging in chalk was also noisy and the enemy would hear it, unless the digging was carried out at such great depth it was inaudible to the enemy, or with such care that it became inefficiently slow. In chalk areas, while mining continued it was often done in the full knowledge that the enemy could hear – and be heard – in a kind of Cold War stalemate.

Walter participated in mining operations around St. Eloi, Hooge, and Hill 60, near

Arras in north-eastern France, where the predominant geology was clay. Digging a tunnel through clay was easier than through chalk, but tunnels required shoring up with timbers and some maintenance to keep the tunnels open: as the clay dried, it contracted; as it got wetter, it expanded, putting tremendous pressure on the supporting woodwork. Starting a mine off – usually with a shaft or an incline at 30 degrees – through wet ground was also tricky, often involving shafts of pre-fabricated metal or concrete rings with which to create a water-tight access to drier soils at greater depth. The clay-kicking method used was very quiet, as the “grafting tool” – a special form of spade – was pushed into the ground rather than striking it as a pick-axe might, and the clay-kicker himself could do much to muffle the sound of his feet hitting the tool as it was kicked into the clay. vi

## OFFENSIVE MINING

We have already referred to the mines fired at the Messines Ridge at the opening of the third battle of Ypres. Twenty-two mines were dug by the Tunnelling Companies, of which one was discovered by the Germans and blocked, and nineteen fired correctly on the morning of 7 June 1917. Of the two remaining, one was triggered by a bolt



of lightning in 1955 while the other remains unaccounted for to this day. But these few short sentences do not properly explain the tremendous undertaking that laying these mines involved.

The Tunnelling Companies had been at work around the Messines Ridge since they had first arrived in France in the spring of 1915. One tunnel,

near Hill 60 to the north of Messines, was named the “Berlin Tunnel”. It was started in July 1915 from a railway cutting about 220 yards behind the British front line, using an incline leading down to a point almost ninety feet below surface level, through a layer of wet, sandy clay that was difficult to work with, into a layer of more robust blue clay; and once at sufficient depth at least a thousand feet of tunnel was excavated. In early 1916, after a German tunnel was detected, and the decision was taken to neutralise it, an explosion was set off, destroying the German tunnel but also damaging 200 feet of the British “Berlin Tunnel”. After this, a new branch tunnel was started towards Hill 60: ground disturbed by explosions was tricky to dig through, and it was often easier to detour. But this branch tunnel itself ran into bad ground, and rather than bypass the area

again it was decided that a larger charge of explosives would be sufficient to counter the fact that the tunnel was some way short of its objective. Trying to enlarge the branch tunnel's end to create a chamber for the explosives the tunnellers broke back into the layer of wet, sandy clay lying above the blue clay. It began to run into the workings, so the tunnellers had to dam the inrush before finding another way to make the space for some 53,500 lbs of ammonal explosive which would form one of the charges that would be set off nearly a year later.

Meanwhile a second branch had been started to replace the section of the "Berlin Tunnel" damaged in counterattacking the German mine, but this too ran into bad ground, forcing the tunnellers to dig down a further fifteen feet to find firmer going to reach their objective, which they did with no further trouble, and explosives were brought in. Then the whole "Berlin Tunnel" complex flooded – fortunately all of the explosive charges had been packed in water-tight tins – and there were also problems with gas, perhaps the fumes of the explosive charges set off against the German tunnel, and which was fatal to the tunnellers if they were unable to escape it. Electric pumping systems broke down and the tunnels had to be cleared of water and ventilated manually, but finally the two mines were ready for firing in November 1916, some fifteen months after the first digging had begun. And there would be other difficulties ahead before the mines were eventually blown in July 1917. viii

## DEFENSIVE MINING



The second purpose of the tunnelling was as a defensive measure, to allow for protection of the Allied lines and mining operations from German mining activity. We have already seen above an explosion being set off in a mine in order to destroy enemy workings: information from a German

prisoner revealed the existence of a German tunnel to which a counter-mine was dug and exploded, wrecking the German galleries. A great deal of information about what the Germans were doing was gathered by the simple expedient of listening, both within the tunnel systems but also at ground level, by infantry patrols sent into no-man's land, and even, on occasion, from the trenches themselves. The sounds of winches, bellows, pumps, digging in shallow workings, and even the sound of the enemy's hob-nailed

boots on the tunnel floor, were often audible; it was more problematic to detect sounds coming from deeper workings.

While some individuals had an uncanny natural ability to identify sound underground, a variety of different devices were developed to help detect the sound of enemy activity, most working on the principle of sound amplification. The favoured British aid was the geophone, in effect a doctor's stethoscope connected to special discs, from which a compass bearing could be taken towards the detected sound. Tunnels were dug to provide forward "listening posts" where men could be stationed to listen for sounds of enemy activity; it may have been one such station, or a much simpler dugout in the front line, where Walter Blackwell was stationed on listening duty in St Julien Wood. Later, listening posts were replaced with electronic sensors linked back to a form of telephone exchange, allowing a single individual to monitor a number of pick-up devices. Regular periods, coordinated up and down the areas in which mining was active, were organised where all work was suspended, to allow the listeners to do their job. All the data gathered was plotted on a map, allowing a comprehensive picture of enemy activity to be built up. Another trick was to use listeners with a command of German, as often the enemy's conversations could be overheard, another useful means to gather intelligence. Silence where sound had previously been heard was perhaps the most terrifying of all: it could mean that the enemy had finished their work, and that their mine could be detonated at any moment.

As a result of this intelligence-gathering, infantry might be withdrawn from a given sector if an enemy explosion was expected, or a tunnel might be dug to allow, as we have already seen, an explosive charge – known as a camouflet – to be detonated and destroy the enemy's tunnels. Sometimes, the miners would break into an enemy tunnel – if they were lucky, an abandoned one – but there was always the chance of encountering Germans, and fighting would ensue with guns, grenades, knives, and even sharpened spades in the confined space underground. On one occasion, British tunnellers accidentally came across a German chamber packed with explosives and ready to fire – which they quietly removed, expecting at any moment that the Germans might blow it up.

## MINING FOR SHELTER

Finally, mining was used to create deep dug-out complexes that would provide a safe place for soldiers to rest, protecting them from the enemy's artillery bombardments. As with the offensive and defensive tunnelling activities, the local geology was all-important. The Royal Engineers estimated that to provide a dugout safe from enemy artillery, about 4.5 metres of "head cover" was needed in areas of hard rock; in clay, more than twice that depth. The dugouts constructed ranged from simple dugouts which

might house a battalion or brigade headquarters, to the complexes which are slated for archaeological investigation and which were home to thousands of men, incorporating sleeping accommodation with bunking for the men, dedicated chambers for officers, cookhouses, dressing stations, storerooms, command and communications posts; a veritable underground city, linked by tunnels to the front line trenches and rear areas, lit by a electric lamps and ventilated mechanically, all powered by petrol generators. When these dugout shelters were abandoned at the end of the First World War, the soldiers living in them – and the miners who were busy working on other schemes – literally walked away, leaving tools, articles of clothing and equipment, and other items of ephemera, which is the focus for the new archaeological investigation. xi

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