
17th Battalion Highland Light Infantry.

“We could see the French soldiers and one night a Frenchman started to sing – he was a wonderful tenor. None of us dared to shoot and suddenly we were all looking out from the trenches and applauding and the Frenchman said ‘Merci’. It was peace in the middle of war and the strange thing was, that just a few kilometres northwards the terrible battle of the Somme was going on”.

Captain Herbert Sulzbach in ‘Forgotten Voices of the First World War’.

Arthur Sheard was born in Batley on September 4th 1897. He began at the school in the autumn of 1911. In the census of 1881 the Sheard family were living at the ‘Top of the High Street’ in Batley. Arthur’s father William was a butcher at this time, but by the 1891 census he had progressed to being a cattle dealer as well as a butcher.
In 1891 the Sheard family were living at number 15 Hanover Street in Batley. William and Annie, his parents, were living with Arthur and his elder brother, William James Sheard. There were three other children of the family living away from home at the time. Coincidentally they were living in the same street as the Hobbs family, whose father was the local congregational minister and lived at the Manse in the same road. Their son Owen was also to die in the Great War.

William progressed to be a master butcher by 1911 and his increased status allowed the family to have a domestic servant living with them by the time of the census of that year. Unfortunately we know little of Arthur Sheard’s military career, as his records do not survive. However, his medal card does survive and tells us that he joined the Highland Light Infantry.

According to the Glasgow Roll of Honour Arthur Sheard was living at 34 Trefoil Avenue Glasgow when he enlisted. The house still exists, with its forbidding red stone frontage. Why Arthur was in Glasgow, after being at Batley Grammar School in 1911 is not known. However, he was to join the 17th (Service) Battalion (3rd Glasgow) Battalion of the Highland Light Infantry (HLI). The regiment was formed in Glasgow on 10 September 1914 by the Chamber of Commerce. It moved briefly to Gailes on 23 September 1914 and then on to Troon on 13 October 1914. A book on the Battalion’s exploits was written shortly after the end of the war. The Battalion produced its own magazine, with stories, poems and adverts for military gear from Glasgow shopkeepers included in the pages.

The HLI, often in their kilts, were well respected by the enemy as this cartoon of the time shows. In late 1916 Private Sheard was part of the HLI attack on Beaumont Hamel, part of the later battles on the Somme.

A cartoon showing the supposed respect the Germans had for the Highland Light Infantry.
The book on the HLI’s war service, ‘Record of Service of the 17th Battalion Highland Light Infantry’ shows that the 17th Battalion were in the Beaumont Hamel region of the Somme in late 1916. It was from there that the HLI battalion to which Arthur Sheard belonged was to take part in an attack on the German trenches in mid November.

The war diary of the 17th Highland Light Infantry shows that on both November 16th and 17th 1918 the troops were in the trenches at Beaumont Hamel and were told to prepare for attacks on the opposite German trenches on both days. Visits were made to the trenches by senior officers and on the 16th packs and blankets were ‘dumped’ in preparation for the attack. After orders were issued cancelling the attack on that day blankets were given out and the men spent the night in billets nearby.

On the next day the battalion were again warned to be prepared for the attack and they left their billets at 2am. As they reached the trench system they were met by guides from the Seaforth Highlanders who were there to help the soldiers take up positions in the labyrinth of trenches.

The day of November 117th must have been a long one for the officers and men of the regiment, knowing that an attack was imminent but not really knowing when it would start.

The diary continues for November 18th 1918:

“Arrangements for artillery barrage and programme of artillery fire sent to company commanders early this morning. Snow commenced to fall in the early hours, later turning into rain. Cold intense.

At 4-40 am messages sent to company commanders that zero time is 6-10am”.

The attack started at ten minutes past six on the morning of November 18th, in icy conditions described well in the war diary. It was held up because of the insufficiency of the artillery barrage and the heavy enemy machine gun fire. At 7.42 a.m. the message came in to the Battalion from the right hand company that the company commander was killed and that a Sergeant and about ten men were holding the right flank.

By 8-10 am the writer of the war diary was able to estimate his battalion casualties so far in the attack as being two Captains, ten subalterns and 330 other ranks killed, missing or wounded.

At 8.30 a.m. a message was received from 2nd Lieut. Macbeth of the right Company, “Am holding old front line with remainder of Battalion, and have established a bombing post on the right. There are only Lieut. Martin and myself in the trench." The left Company was also being hard pressed. It was reported by one of the Battalion officers that when the barrage opened a great number of shells fell just in front of New Munich Trench where the attacking companies were lying out, killing and wounding a large number of the Battalion. When the barrage lifted on to Munich Trench for the last four minutes, it was still short, and when the leading waves came up to about 50 or 60 yards from Munich Trench followed by the barrage, the Germans could be seen lying in the trench in force.
The failure of the attack was put down to the inefficiency of the British supporting barrage, together with the condition of the ground. A thaw had set in and rain falling on the snow, making it exceedingly slippery. Additionally the HLI men were good targets against the snowy background.

Describing the attack one of the members of the Battalion wrote:-

"The preliminary bombardment opened with its awful messages of destruction, and the rapid reply of the enemy's artillery indicated ominously that our intentions were not unknown to him. When our barrage lifted, and the first wave of our men attempted to go forward, their dark forms showed up against the snow. They were met by machine gun fire, by rapid fire from the enemy trenches, and by snipers in skilfully chosen holes. Our bombardment had failed. It was impossible to get to close quarters with the enemy—hopeless to advance—dangerous to retire.

Many of our men were killed in the attack, others in the attempt to carry in the wounded. Many remained all day in exposed positions, beside their wounded comrades, in hope of rescuing them when darkness fell.”

The 51st Highland Division, to which the 17th Battalion belonged, have their own memorial at Beaumont Hamel.

The war diary gives a graphic account as to why the attack went so badly, at least in the eyes of a young Lieutenant Martin, who had gone as far as he could before retreating to his own lines.

“When barrage opened, a great number of shells fell just in front of New Munich trench where our companies were lying out, killing and wounding a large number of men. When the barrage lifted on to Munich trench for four minutes it was still short and when the leading waves came up to about 50 or 60 yards from Munich trench following up the barrage I saw the Germans lying in the trench in force. So near was I to the trench that I opened fire with my revolver”.
Lieutenant Martin himself put the failure of the attack down to the inefficiency of the barrage, the thawing condition of the ground and the extreme cold which had prevailed.

On November 20th 1916 the Highlanders were relieved by the 15th Lancashire Fusiliers. Back at their billets at Mailly Mailet a tally of casualties was made on November 20th 1918. Killed and missing in the attack were 63 Other Ranks, whilst 13 were wounded. Officer casualties were 9 killed and 2 wounded.

Arthur Sheard was one of the soldiers of the Highland Light Infantry killed on the day of the attack on the German trenches at Beaumont Hamel, on November 18th 1916. The regimental history shows that many men of the regiment were killed even before the attack started, by an artillery barrage that hit them as they lay out in the snow above the trench, waiting to advance into no man’s land.

Private Sheard could have been part of the casualties of the bombardment or the attack itself, which was an abject failure. Many men of the battalion were killed or wounded, either by the subsequent machine gun fire or the firing of German snipers. However, many were killed by their own bombardment, both as they lay waiting to advance, and when they reached the German trenches as the barrage fell short.

Ironically Arthur Sheard’s near neighbour from Hanover Street in Batley was to be his near neighbour in the attack on Beaumont Hamel, with the Royal Naval Division. Owen Hobbs died in the earlier attack on the village, some five days before Arthur Sheard.

Arthur Sheard is buried in New Munich Trench Cemetery near Beaumont Hamel village in France. The cemetery was made by V Corps in the spring of 1917, when their units cleared the battlefield, and it was known also as V Corps Cemetery No.25. There are now nearly 150, 1914-18 war casualties commemorated at this site. Of these, almost 20 are unidentified. All fell in the period November 1916, or January 1917, and the majority belonged to the 10/11th, 16th or 17th Highland Light Infantry.

The headstone for Arthur Sheard bears the words ‘Youngest son of W.J. and A.E. Sheard, Batley Yorkshire, England’, as the family reclaimed their son.
New Munich Trench Cemetery near Beaumont Hamel

Arthur Sheard’s name appears on the Batley War Memorial in Batley town centre. On the same panel can be found the names of several other Old Batelians, Lawrence Ryan, William A. Sheard and Horace K. Stedeford.

A panel of Batley war memorial bearing the name of A. Sheard.
It is interesting to note as a postscript that the school magazine of December 1916 noted that:

“**The war still continues to exact its terrible toll of lives. News has come to hand that W. A. Sheard, whom many of us remember has been killed in action. We extend our deepest sympathy to his parents and friends in their great loss**”

The announcement should have read that ‘A. Sheard’ had been killed in action, as W. A. Sheard, also known as ‘Arthur’ was actually still alive until 1918. The confusion of names is somewhat understandable, but the announcement must have caused some concern for the family of William Arthur Sheard if it was brought to their notice at the time.