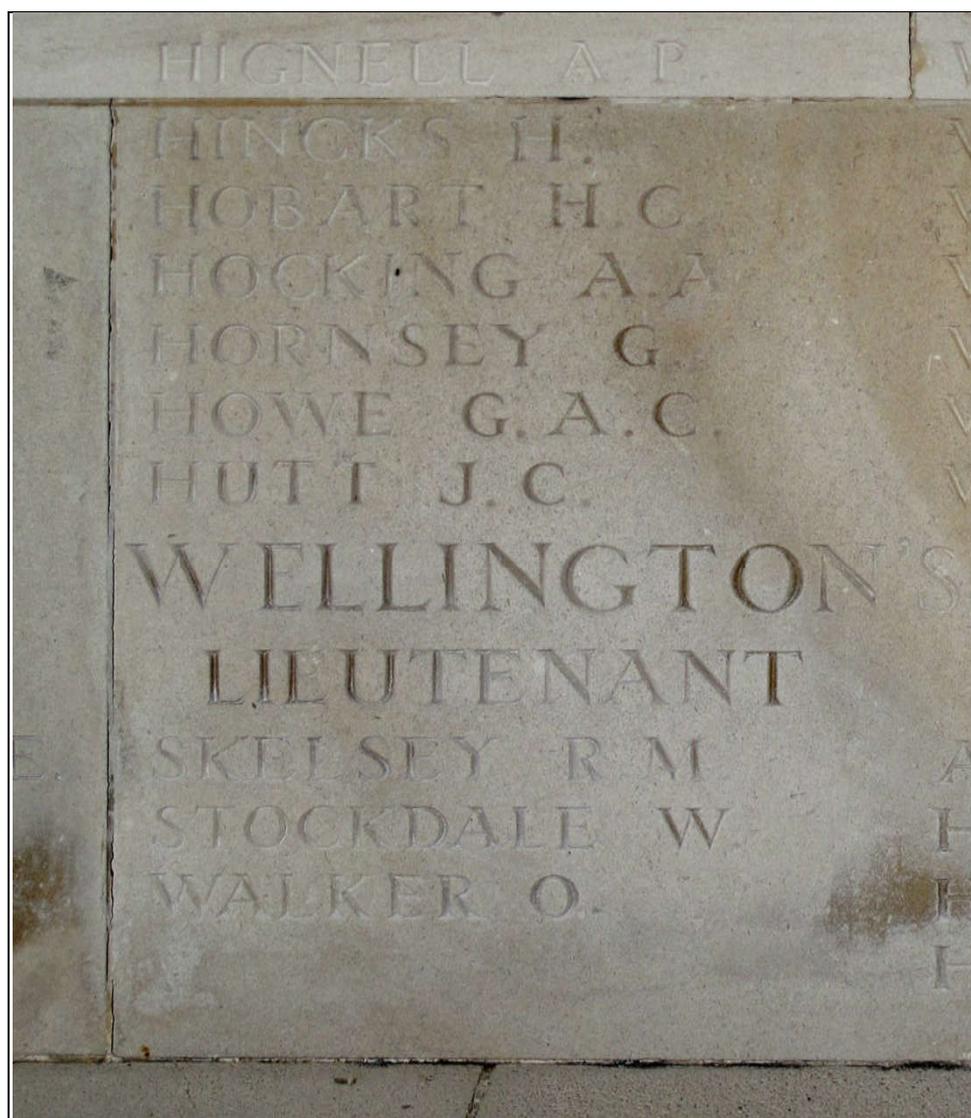


## Lieutenant Robert Max Skelsey (1886 – 1918).

### 186<sup>th</sup> Trench Mortar Battery, Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment.

'Another example of military dilatoriness was the delay in taking up the Stokes mortar. This instrument was invented by Mr Wilfred Stokes in January, 1915. The military authorities twice pronounced it dangerous, though they did not themselves sit about improving it or producing something better; the trench mortars in use in 1915 were regarded by the infantry as most unreliable.

Sir Llewellyn Woodward: 'Great Britain and the War of 1914-1918' (1967).



The name Skelsey R. M. as it appears on the Arras Memorial

Robert Max Skelsey was born in Johannistal in Berlin on February 21<sup>st</sup> 1886. It is not known why the family was in Germany at the time, but as his father Walter was a manager of a cement factory after returning to England it is possible that he was overseeing a similar

venture in the town in Germany, and indeed there is still a large cement works there today. Robert Skelsey's father was born in Toronto, Canada, but he went to school in Sheffield.

Walter attended the Wesley College in Sheffield. This was a school to educate the sons of the laity, opened in 1838 in new buildings designed by William Flockton on Glossop Road, Sheffield. It was founded by the Reverend Samuel Dousland Waddy (1804–1876) to “supply a generally superior and classical education, combined with religious training in the principles of Methodism” and was initially called the “Wesleyan Proprietary Grammar School”.

The Skelsey family were originally from Sheffield where Walter's father was shown to have a large farm according to the 1861 census. Robert Skelsey's father Walter and his mother, Amy, married in 1878. The 1881 census shows that the Skelsey family with Walter as the head, were now living in Soothill, Batley. Walter was shown as a Woollen Manufacturer by profession. They had one servant living with them at this time.

In the 1901 census the Skelsey family were shown as living at Cottingham in Yorkshire. Walter was shown now as a 46 year old employer, a cement factory manager, and his son John, 21, was also shown as a works manager. There is to this day a very big cement works just a few miles from the village of Cottenham and it is probable that this was where Walter went to work.

Robert was fifteen years old at this time and there was another brother, Harold who was eleven years old, with a sister, Hilda who was seventeen years of age. A domestic servant also lived with the family. One other person living with the family was Walter's brother John H. Skelsey, who was sixty one and living on his own means. The fact that he was born in Wakefield would tend to indicate that the Skelsey family were from Yorkshire rather than Canada in the first place. Strangely the record states that he has a door that is private from the children!

By 1911 the Skelsey family had moved to Batley, to Shaftesbury House (noted as Shaftsefield House on the census form) and Robert Max Skelsey was living at home there with his mother, father, cousin and two servants. Robert's occupation was shown as a salesman. His father had apparently returned to his previous employment as a woollen manufacturer, and employer.

In 1913 Robert Skelsey married Mary Rutherford Pearson in Cottingham, where he was living at the time of the 1901 census, indicating that Mary was perhaps a childhood sweetheart. Early in 1914 Robert and Mary Skelsey had a child, named after Robert's father, Walter.

Robert Skelsey's son Walter served in the army during the Second World War. In a notice in the newspapers in 1940 his solicitor announced that he would be changing his name. He was henceforth to be known as Walter Rutherford Skelsey, thus taking the name of his mother's family into his own family name. Robert Skelsey's son served as a Major in the Second World War, in the same regiment his father had joined some twenty five years earlier. Robert

Skelsey's brother Harold also served with the 'Dukes' in the First World War, surviving the carnage and eventually emigrating to Australia where he died in 1945.

Robert Skelsey joined the Duke of Wellington's Regiment from the Leeds University Officer Cadet Corps. A note on his personal file showed that he joined his battalion as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant on June 11<sup>th</sup> 1915. From his medal record we can tell that he went to France with his regiment, the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment, on September 22<sup>nd</sup> 1916.

He applied for his commission on May 30<sup>th</sup> 1915. In the questions for his application he noted that he had been born in Schoenweide, Germany, but in order to avoid any suspicion as to his loyalties, he added a short note to the answer that he had **'...left Germany after three months'**.

On the question regarding school attended Skelsey wrote Hymers College Hull. Hymers College opened in 1893 as a school for boys on the site of the old Botanic Gardens of Hull. It soon established itself as a centre of academic excellence, and parents from Hull and the East Riding were keen for their sons to be admitted. Whether he attended before or after Batley Grammar School is not known, but it is likely that he attended Batley first before moving to East Yorkshire. By the time of his application he showed his address as 4 Caledonia Road, Saville Town, Dewsbury.

The 1/4th Battalion was a territorial unit based in Halifax, serving with 2nd West Riding Brigade, West Riding Division. When war broke out in August 1914, the units of the Division had just departed for their annual summer camp, they were at once recalled to their home base and mobilised for war service, taking up positions on the coastal defences near Hull and Grimsby. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 1914 they moved to billets in Doncaster for the winter. They trained in South Yorkshire and Lincolnshire in preparation for service overseas. The original drafts of the regiment went to France on April 14<sup>th</sup> 1915, sailing from Folkestone to Boulogne. Robert Skelsey was to join them in France a year and a half later.

He was to be in France on this first occasion for only two months, as on November 5<sup>th</sup> 1916 he was injured whilst digging a dug out in the trenches. Lieutenant Skelsey was using a pick axe to dig the shelter and the pick axe went through his foot. As a result of the injury he was sent back to England via Dover and Calais on December 1<sup>st</sup> 1916. As was normal, a medical board was convened as to his fitness to return to duty.

On December 5<sup>th</sup> 1916 a board sat at Caxton Hall, London, where the circumstances of his injury were noted:

**"When on duty in the trenches, working with a pick axe he accidentally stuck the point in the foot. The wound became infected. The wound has now healed but there is some stiffness left"**

A mystery surrounding the officer is revealed in these papers for the medical board in that a note added to the form notes that the officer, prior to this incident, had been missing presumed dead for several weeks. Clearly he was not dead at all!

On May 7<sup>th</sup> 1917 Robert Skelsey faced another Medical Board at the Northern General Hospital in Leeds. His disability, of an accidental wound to the right foot, was noted and also that he was quite well. It was recommended that he be given three weeks leave and that he would be fit for duty after that. The board once again made the comment that the officer had been missing for several weeks prior to the injury. Where he had been was not revealed or explained and will remain a mystery.

Lieutenant Robert Skelsey was seconded to the Trench Mortar Battery of his regiment when he returned to duty in France. The trench mortar battery was manned by members of the brigade who undertook special training.

The battery was armed with four Stokes mortars. Stokes' design was simple but highly effective. It consisted chiefly of a smooth metal tube fixed to a base plate with a light bi-pod mount. When a bomb was dropped into the tube an impact sensitive cartridge at the base of the bomb would make contact with a firing pin at the base of the tube, thereby ejecting the bomb. The Stokes mortar could fire as many as 22 bombs per minute and had a maximum range of 1,200 yards. The Stokes came in three parts: the firing tube (43 lbs), the base plate (28 lbs) and the bipod (37 lbs), a total of 108 lbs.

The Trench Mortar Battery was one of the most unpopular jobs in the brigade as no sooner had they opened up on the enemy than they were themselves fired upon. This was both by similar German short range weapons and larger more accurate artillery. Consequently casualties in the battery were very high.

Robert Skelsey was killed during the last ditch offensive by the German army in the spring of 1918. The date of his death was March 29<sup>th</sup>, 1918 during the "Kaiserschlacht," the final series of desperate German offensives of the war. It seems that his battalion were involved in the Battle of Fampoux on that day.

The village of Fampoux in Northern France was taken from the Germans during the Battle of Arras in 1917. It remained behind the Allied front line until the Germans' final Spring Offensive a year later. The Germans were desperate to secure a victory and on 28th March 1918 made a heavy attack on the British and French lines.

Fampoux was at the centre point of the assault, and its control was vital to both sides. After heavy shelling and fierce fighting, German infantry captured part of the village - but the British, including many men of the Hampshire Regiment, though tremendously hard-pressed, maintained their hold on the remainder. It was this stand at the Battle of Fampoux that is commemorated by the Fampoux gardens and memorial in Bournemouth. The number of casualties during the battle for the village is evidenced by the fact that there are no less than five war cemeteries around the village of Fampoux. They contain the graves of many hundreds of soldiers - some of whom will never be identified.

Robert Skelsey's probate record showed that he left £302-18s-4d to his wife Mary Rutherford Skelsey. His father Walter died a decade later in 1927 and left £14,000 to his accountant. He was living at 22A Duchy Road Harrogate, the address where Robert was shown as living

when he died according to the probate record. The same record notes that Robert Skelsey died in 'either' France or Belgium, such was the lack of knowledge of how and when he died.

The name of Robert Max Skelsey does not actually appear on the Batley War Memorial, however, the name of Max Skelsey does. Like many of the soldiers on the roll of Batley Grammar School he seemingly went by his second name. His name is commemorated on the panels of the Arras Memorial.



**Part of the Arras Memorial.**