

Banstead Remembers

*Private George Mitchell
of 44 Oatlands Road, Burgh Heath*

*8th The Queen's (Royal West Surrey Regiment)
Gassed in Belgium, aged 20
30th April 1916*



SATURDAY 30th APRIL

at All Saints Church, Banstead

7:30am: the churchyard flag will be raised to half-mast
10:55am: a short service of remembrance will be held
11am: a church bell will be tolled 100 times

At least 33 men from Oatlands Road served overseas during the war;
10 never returned. Please come and remember the sacrifice that our
local community made 100 years ago in World War One.

*We will remember **each** one*

Private George Mitchell of 44 Oatlands Road, Burgh Heath

George Henry Mitchell was born near the Blue Ball pub in Walton on the Hill on 19th March 1896. He was the third of eight children born to John and Susan Mitchell.

John was born in Banstead and worked as a labourer. The family moved around with his work, living in Mogador, Shoreham, Walton on the Hill, Epsom and Ewell before settling in Oatlands Road, Burgh Heath.

They lived at number 22 (now numbered 44), a semi-detached house on the south side of the road (the houses on the north side of the street are post-war). George's grandmother moved in too and there were 11 people crammed into a 3-bedroom house, typical of the overcrowding that was rife in the area at the time.

The boys attended the Wesleyan School on the Green, where the older boys were taught gardening and woodwork in addition to the usual Three Rs. John lied about their ages so that they could finish their schooling earlier and go to work. George left school aged 13 and became a labourer, probably working with his father and an elder brother on a local farm.

George enlisted for long-term service with the Army in late 1914/early 1915 rather than just signing on for the duration of the war. He was posted to the 8th (Service) Battalion of The Queen's (Royal West Surrey Regiment) and arrived in France on 23rd December 1915.

The Queen's were resting and refitting, recovering from their bloody baptism of fire at the Battle of Loos, and George was one of many amongst the drafts of reinforcements that arrived during the winter. As well as training, sporting competitions were held, a cinema was set up and Christmas dinner was laid on. It must have been a happy time for them all after the disaster of their first battle.

The Queen's returned to the trenches near Ypres in the New Year, the Battalion rotating with other units so that they spent a few days in and then a few days out of the line resting during the day and building defensive works at night. It was cold but quiet.

In mid-April it became apparent that the Germans were up to something. British shells landing in the German trenches caused a cloud of yellow-green fumes to erupt and deserters and prisoners reported that a gas attack was imminent. The Queen's were put on permanent Gas Alert.

In the early hours of 30th April, under cover of the noise of machine gun fire, the Germans turned on their gas cylinders. The first sign was the smell. The gas alarms were rung but were drowned out by artillery and gunfire in many places. Very lights now lit the billowing gas cloud in brilliant colours. The Germans attacked across No Man's Land, gaining a foothold in the British trenches where No Man's Land was at its narrowest. They were driven out by the 1st North Staffordshires, supported by the 8th The Queen's. Over 500 men were gassed, of whom 89 died, and there were 312 other casualties during the fighting.

George died from gas poisoning. He was 20 years old. He is buried in the Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension and is commemorated at All Saints (Banstead), St Mary's (Burgh Heath) and in the Burgh Heath War Memorial Hall.

George was awarded the British War Medal, the Victory Medal and the 1914-15 Star.

Two of George's brothers were killed during the war and his youngest brother died from illness in 1917.