

Banstead Remembers

Private Alfred Skelton

of 15 Ferndale Road

8th Royal Fusiliers

Served in France

Died of his wounds, aged 30



THURSDAY 13th APRIL

at All Saints Church, Banstead

11:50am: a short service of remembrance will be held

Noon: a church bell will be tolled 100 times

The churchyard flag will be raised to half mast at 7:30am and lowered at 5:30pm

The Battle of Arras is often forgotten, overshadowed by the fighting that took place before it on the Somme and afterwards at Passchendaele. Eight men from Banstead and Burgh Heath were killed in the battle. Alfred was one of three Banstead men to lose their lives on 13th April 1917.

*We will remember **each** one*

Private Alfred Skelton of 15 Ferndale Road

Alfred George Skelton was born on 18th November 1886 in Walton on the Hill. He was one of the eldest of Charles and Elizabeth Rosa Skelton's ten children.

The Skeltons lived at 2 Withybed Corner, one of a cluster of cottages near The Bell public house, before moving first to Norrington's Cottages, in Tadworth, and then to Banstead in the early 1900s. They lived at 10 Firtree Cottages, Pound Road, one of ten cottages that used to stand where the modern numbers 9-29 are today. Several of the men in Pound Road, including Alfred and his father, were employed as labourers for the Epsom Rural Council and Alfred worked on the roads.

Also living in Pound Road were the Smewing family and Alfred married Edith Smewing on Boxing Day 1908. They made their home at Myrtle Cottage (now number 15) Ferndale Road and a son, Alfred Charles, was born in 1910.

Alfred enlisted in the Army under the Derby Scheme on 7th December 1915 and chose to join his brother Stanley's unit, the East Surrey Regiment. He opted to defer his service and received his notice in June 1916 when the married men were called up. Upon completing his training, he was assigned to the 9th Battalion and sent to serve in France in October. After disembarking, Alfred did not join his new unit and instead became part of a draft of men to reinforce the 8th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers.

The 8th Royal Fusiliers spent the winter of 1916-17 near Arras, holding the line for short tours, on various fatigues for the Royal Engineers and undergoing extensive training in new formations and tactics for the coming attack. The French were to launch a major new offensive along the River Aisne and the British were to provide a diversion to draw German reserves north. They would attack near Arras on a front that ran from Croiselles, in the south, to Vimy Ridge, in the north. Alfred's division were to fight in the centre of the battlefield and advance along the River Scarpe.

At 5:30am on 9th April 1917, the 8th Fusiliers left their trenches and advanced under cover of poor light, heavy snowfall and a barrage that battered the German lines. They were in support of the leading troops of their brigade and were right on their heels as they entered the German firing line. Moving behind a creeping barrage, the lead battalions captured the front line system and the Fusiliers advanced through them to take the line of defensive works that guarded Observation Ridge. The attack was a great success but the 8th Royal Fusiliers suffered over 160 casualties. Alfred was wounded, he had been hit in the head by a bullet, and he was evacuated for treatment. He died four days later, on 13th April, in hospital at Rouen. He was 30.