

Driver J.Marshall – Royal Field Artillery

Although our war memorial records his name as 'J.Marshall', it is believed that this entry refers to Henry Marshall* who was born in Wotton in 1881, the son of John and Mary Ann Marshall who later lived at 'The Olive', St John's Road. John Marshall was a carter and Henry became a carman.

Henry enlisted at Dorking and his experience working with horses was no doubt the reason why he became a driver in the Royal Field Artillery. After training he was posted to the 32nd Divisional Ammunition Column responsible for transporting ammunition to the Division's front-line units. The war was dominated by artillery; vast quantities of ammunition were needed and motor vehicles or horse-drawn wagons were used to transport it from forward ammunition depots to the gun positions. Great skill was needed to handle horses in the difficult shell-torn ground of the Western Front, particularly under fire.

The 32nd Division was formed mainly from recruits in the north of England who responded to Lord Kitchener's 'Your Country Needs You' appeal for volunteers, many of whom formed the 'Pals' battalions of northern regiments. The Division went to France in November 1915 as part of the Fourth Army and its first major action was in the Battle of the Somme in 1916. It was hoped the Somme offensive would break the deadlock in the war but its only real benefit was to relieve pressure on the French Army at Verdun; it gained little ground for the loss of thousands of lives.

By early 1917 the Germans were critically short of manpower. To improve the situation they withdrew to a new defensive position, known as the Hindenburg Line. This reduced the length of their line by 25 miles and saved 17 divisions. The Allies gained much ground as a result, but the new German defences were as formidable as before.

The Allies decided to launch a new offensive at Ypres in the north. The plan was that the main thrust would capture the ridges to the south and east of the city; this would be followed by operations by the Fourth Army to gain control of the coast. The first phase began on 31st July 1917, but things soon began to go wrong. The opening artillery barrage destroyed the system of dykes in the area and heavy rains in August created appalling conditions for the infantry. Troops had to fight in a morass and progress was extremely difficult. When the offensive - known as the Third Battle of

Ypres, or Passchendaele - ended on 6th November, the Allies had gained 4^{1/2} miles. Casualties on both sides were enormous.

The coastal operations by the Fourth Army were cancelled and its Divisions were drawn off as reinforcements. It appears that Henry Marshall's unit was committed to the main battle as he was killed on 28th October 1917; we do not know the circumstances of his death. He is buried at Vlamertinghe New Military Cemetery about 5 km west of Ypres. The village of Vlamertinghe was just out of range of enemy shell fire, and was used as a base for artillery and field ambulance units and as a place for military burials for much of the war.

Henry Marshall was the brother of Thomas Marshall who is also remembered on our memorial.

***Footnote After the war the village gave a 'We Thank you' Dinner to the men of Westcott who returned. The menu card includes a list of all the men who served and identifies with the sign of a cross those who made the supreme sacrifice, one of whom was H.Marshall. There is no 'J.Marshall' on the list which would appear to confirm our identification.**