

The military service history of  
**William Henry Plimbley**

A report from  
**fourteeneighteen/research**  
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# **Introduction**

## ***Report prepared for***

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## ***Our thanks***

We are very pleased that you selected fourteeneighteen/research for the project. It has been a great pleasure to undertake the work and we sincerely hope that you enjoy reading this report. Please do not hesitate to contact us if there are outstanding questions or points you would like to clarify.

## ***The contents of the report***

Our report contains the following sections:

1. Archival search results
2. William's military career
3. Background information
4. Some next steps you might take.

## Archival findings

### ***Records of those who lost their lives***

#### *The records of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission*

The registers of the cemeteries and memorials under the care of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) were compiled during and after the war, originally by the army's own Graves Registration Units and later by the then Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC).

*The register states that Private 9689 William Henry Plimbley of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the North Staffordshire Regiment died on 5 November 1914. Aged 21 he was the son of Reuben and Mary Jane Plimbley of 56 Stanley Street, Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent.*

The inclusion of William's age and other personal details in this statement is proof that his parents completed and returned the "Final Verification Form" which was sent to them by the IWGC. This form required the next of kin to complete the soldier's age, relatives and address details. The information was used by the IWGC to compile the registers, in association with regimental records.

*The register also tells us that William is buried in plot III, row B, grave 41 of Boulogne Eastern Cemetery, Boulogne, Pas de Calais, France.*

#### *"Soldiers Died in the Great War, 1914-1919"*

This work was compiled by His Majesty's Stationery Office from regimental records and published in a large number of volumes in 1921.

*The entry adds that William was born and lived in Burslem and enlisted in Stoke on Trent. It otherwise adds that he died of wounds, which is entirely consistent with burial at Boulogne.*

#### *Death registration and certificate*

William appears in the index of registered deaths for 1914. The full reference, from which a copy of his death certificate can be purchased online from the General Register Office (<http://www.gro.gov.uk>) is *Overseas Military Deaths 1914, volume I.43, page 8*. The information given by overseas military certificates is often uninformative and in William's case we would not expect it to say more than "died of wounds" although as his death was a relatively early one it may have some small additional detail.

### ***Army service records***

The primary and most comprehensive source of information concerning a soldier's military career is his service record. The various forms and other documents making up the record covered the entire process between enlistment and discharge. If they can be found they often provide personal, family and medical details, in addition to the facts of his training, postings to units, disciplinary record and so on. The service record is, for men who survived, the only source that is likely to mention the man's address and next of kin.

There are three collections of Great War army service records, all of which are held at the National Archives in Kew. These are the WO363 ("burnt"), WO364 and PIN26 ("pensions") collections, which originally included between them the service and pension records of all men other than the Guards and Household Regiments, who were discharged from the army prior to 1922. Only some 30% of soldiers papers now exist in these collections as the remainder were destroyed by fire in the War Office warehouse where they were stored in London in 1940.

*No trace of William's record could be found in any of these collections. That is, we were able to eliminate all of the surviving records of all men of the name of Plimbley, based on their place of birth or residence and their regiment. We also tried every spelling variant we could think of, but without any further success. Absence of a record is almost certainly due to the papers having been destroyed in the fire in 1940.*

### ***Campaign medals records***

The medal entitlement documents are a limited source of information, as they only give bare military details from the moment the man's qualification began – which is when he first landed overseas. However, they are intact and the details of virtually all soldiers who qualified can be found. The records consist of an entry for the individual in a "roll", which is essentially a list of men who qualified for the particular medal, plus an index card which provides a reference to the rolls in which the soldier is recorded.

*We have attached William's entries in the index (a card) and in the rolls of the 1914 Star and the British War and Victory Medals.*

### ***National Roll of Honour and de Ruvigny's Roll of Honour***

Both of these contemporary works were compiled on a subscription basis (in other words, the soldier or his family paid for an entry), which means that they are far from comprehensive although they do list many tens of thousands of men. Listings were often written by family members who may not have given correct details at the time of compilation and in consequence neither is

considered to be completely reliable. The National Roll went out of business before it produced any coverage of the Staffordshire area outside Birmingham.

*There is no entry for William in these rolls.*

### ***Gallantry and other special awards***

Gallantry and other unusual awards (including mentions in despatches) were invariably announced in the London Gazette, the official newspaper of British Parliament. This was usually followed a day or two later by a reprint in the “Times” and then the local press.

*We could find no evidence of any award being made to William Plimbley.*

### ***Newspaper archives***

The official War Office casualty lists were reproduced in a number of newspapers, with the “Times” having the most complete coverage - but even that began to leave out the long lists of wounded and missing from late 1916 onwards due to paper shortage. The “Times” is digitally searchable, as are a number of other newspapers being added to the online British Newspaper Archive (although this is as yet only partial and has little coverage of the appropriate area – for example the Staffordshire Sentinel is not yet included). The digital search is not foolproof or consistent, largely as the originals that have been scanned carry the details in very tiny print that can be mis-read by such methods.

*We found William amongst a list of men reported to have died of wounds which was reproduced in the Lichfield Mercury on 18 December 1914. The list was issued by the British General Headquarters in France on 15 November. It had already been printed in the Times six days before. Copies of both newspapers are attached. Note that William’s surname is rendered as Plimbly.*

*While searching the local newspapers we found three references between March and May 1914 to a man named Plimbley playing as goalkeeper for the “A” team of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the North Staffordshire Regiment.*

### ***Operational records***

All units were obliged to maintain a war diary while they were on active service. Although they generally used a standard format and were under instructions giving the sort of information to be recorded, they vary enormously in quality and content. It is unusual to see a man of non-commissioned rank mentioned by name.

*We have attached a copy of the war diary of the battalion with which William served, covering the all of his service in France.*

*Also attached is a copy of the good, concise published history of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division, under whose command the battalion came.*

### **Civil records**

We have attached William's entry in the census taken on 2 April 1911.

We noted that William's birth was registered in the Wolstanton District of Staffordshire in the April-June quarter of 1893 (volume 6b, page 158).

## William Henry Plimbley's military career

*You will see that there is little by way of official documentary record of William's service in the public domain. In this section we add to the bare facts.*

### ***Enlistment and early service***

William Henry Plimbley was serving as Private 9689 of the *1st Battalion* of the North Staffordshire Regiment when it landed at Saint-Nazaire in France on 12 September 1914.<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand more about his enlistment and early service we searched for records of men of the regiment who had been given numbers nearby. This showed that William's number relates to enlistment into the regular army on or very soon after 18 March 1912. We shall return to this shortly.

The census of April 1911 shows William at Whittington Barracks in Lichfield, serving as a Private of the regiment's *4th (Extra Reserve) Battalion*. This suggests that prior to re-enlisting into the regular army in 1912 he had a period of service with the Regiment's Special Reserve.

The Special Reserve had been established in 1908 as a means for the regiments to build up a pool of trained men. It was in peace time a part time occupation with the man being obliged only to attend for summer training camps once he had completed a period of preliminary training. Enlistment was open to men with no previous military experience although former regulars could also join. A man could enlist for one, or more usually six, years' service. The *4th (Extra Reserve) Battalion* was one of two units that the regiment had for the purpose of training the Special Reservists. It was possible to enlist into the Special Reserve from the age of 18, so William could have done so only from his birthday in 1911 and thus it seems was still in his period of preliminary training when the census was taken.

When he re-enlisted as a regular he would have accepted the standard term of engagement which required him to serve for twelve years. Had he not lost his life in the Great War he would have completed his engagement in March 1924. The term would commence with seven years of full time service and be completed by five years on reserve.

The new recruit would usually spend around three months in basic training at the *regiment depot* at Whittington Barracks but this might be shortened if the man had completed preliminary training as a Special Reservist. He would then be posted to whichever of the regiment's two regular battalions were on home

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<sup>1</sup> The 10 September 1914 given in the medal roll and reproduced onto the index card is not strictly correct as far as the physical landing is concerned, but is the first day that the battalion was at sea.

service at the time. In 1912 it was the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, which was in barracks in Buttevant, Cork, Ireland. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was in India.<sup>2</sup>

It would appear that William spent all of the rest of his time before the war at Buttevant, quite possibly becoming the goalkeeper of the battalion football team.

### ***Service in France and Flanders***

The movements and fortunes of the battalion can be followed in detail in the war diary. It was throughout the period under command of the 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, part of 6<sup>th</sup> Division. The attached history of the division provides a good narrative and context of its early weeks in France. You will see that shortly after its arrival the division took part in the Battle of the Aisne.

We know that William died of wounds on 5 November 1914 and at that point was in the care of one of the British Base Hospitals that had been established in that city. What is harder to know, at least without some other fragment of information, is when he was wounded. In the majority of cases, death occurred relatively soon after the man was hit, with loss of blood, shock and gangrene being primary factors in men's deaths. There are cases where the man survived for much longer but these are comparatively rare. We would not expect that William had been wounded before, say, a week prior to his death. It could have been rather shorter than that although the journey from the front line to Boulogne, with stops for stabilisation treatment at a field hospital and Casualty Clearing Station along the way, could take up to two days.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Division left the Aisne front in early October and, along with the rest of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), was moved north to Flanders. This was a logical move as the movements of the early war period had taken the BEF a long way from the supply ports at the English Channel and positioned it with French Armies on either side. Moving it to Flanders shortened the supply line and placed the BEF on the French left. At the same time, though, German moves to attempt to outflank the Allied line (that is, to go around to the north of it) led to large German forces advancing on Flanders. As early as 12 October, even while the move was in progress, elements of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division once again came into contact with the enemy. The North Staffords, having arrived by train at Hazebrouck, heard on 13 October that the enemy was not far away at Bailleul and Outtersteene. As both sides attempted to advance, a battle of encounter developed over a very wide front. It lasted until well into November 1914.

For descriptive purposes the fighting was defined by the Battles Nomenclature Committee after the war: this period is described as four geographically separate engagements, all within a phase known as the "Operations in Flanders, 10 October to 22 November 1914). They are, from south to north, the "*Battle of La Bassée*, 10 October to 2 November 1914"; the "*Battle of*

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<sup>2</sup> Most infantry regiments had two regular battalions. One would be at home and the other overseas on garrison service. They would be switched at times, but the period overseas could be very lengthy. The 2<sup>nd</sup> North Staffords were away from home from 1902 to 1921, for example.

Armentières, 13 October to 2 November 1914”; the “Battle of Messines, 12 October to 2 November 1914”; and the “First Battles of Ypres, 19 October to 22 November 1914”.

It is the “Battle of Armentières” which with we must concern ourselves for it was in that engagement that the 6<sup>th</sup> Division was involved. The maps below describe the location:

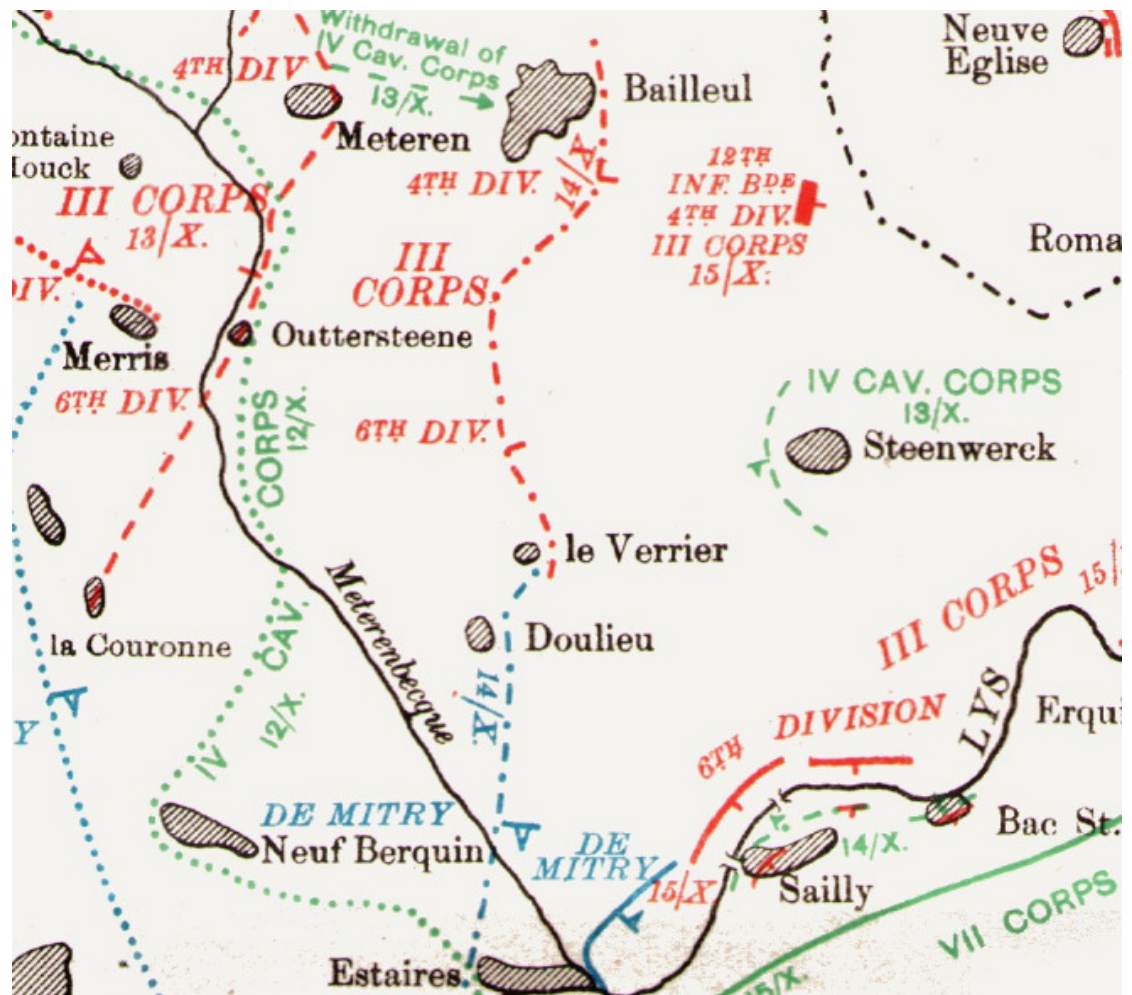


Figure 1: this is an extract from a map that forms part of the British Official History. It shows the deployment of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division after arrival at Hazebrouck. By the end of 13 October (red dashed line) it had advanced to the line La Couronne to Outtersteene (the 1<sup>st</sup> North Staffords sustained its first casualties in Flanders on this day); by 14 October (red dot-dash line) to Le Verrier – Méteren; and by the end of 15 October it was on the line of the River Lys facing the bridge crossings at Saily-sur-la-Lys and Bac St Maur. The green line shows that the Germans had closed up to the opposite bank although certain elements of German cavalry had been patrolling as deep as Outtersteene. The blue positions are French.

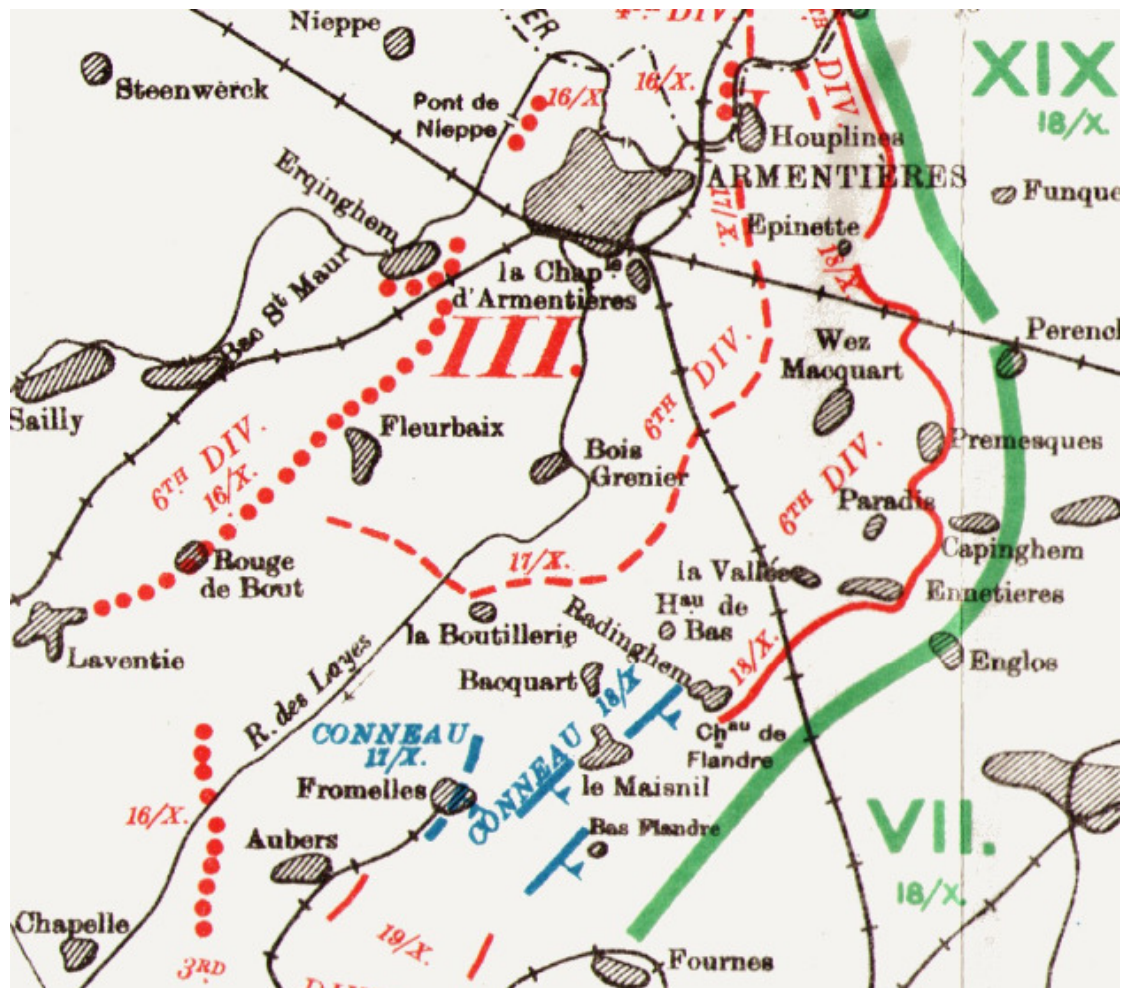


Figure 2: the forward movement continued for the next three days. At the end of 16 October (red dotted) the 6<sup>th</sup> Division was across the Lys and on the line Laventie-Erquinghem; 24 hours later (red dashed) it was east of Bois Grenier; and by the end of 18 October (red solid) was facing the main body of the enemy which was now on the green line shown. The 1<sup>st</sup> North Staffords were now in reserve at Wez Macquart. Other elements of their brigade captured Prêmesques but were unable to reach Pérenchies.

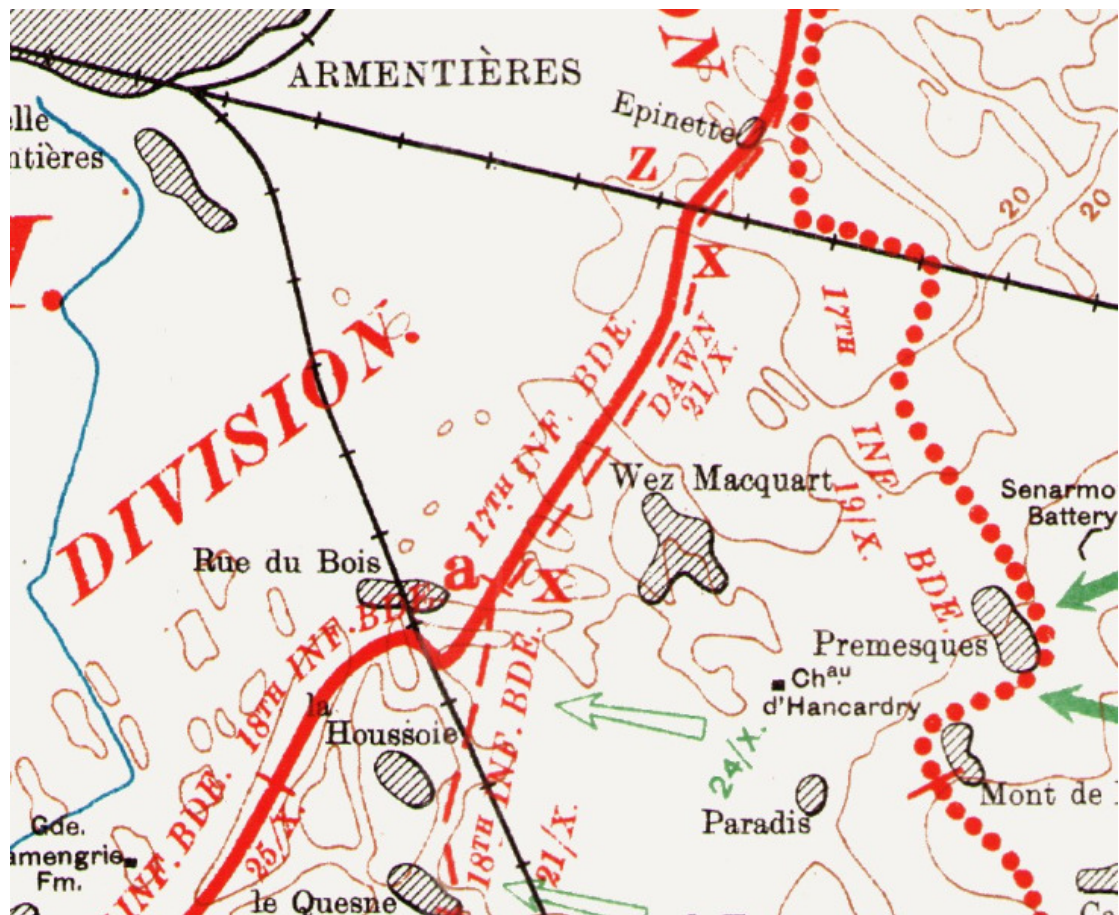
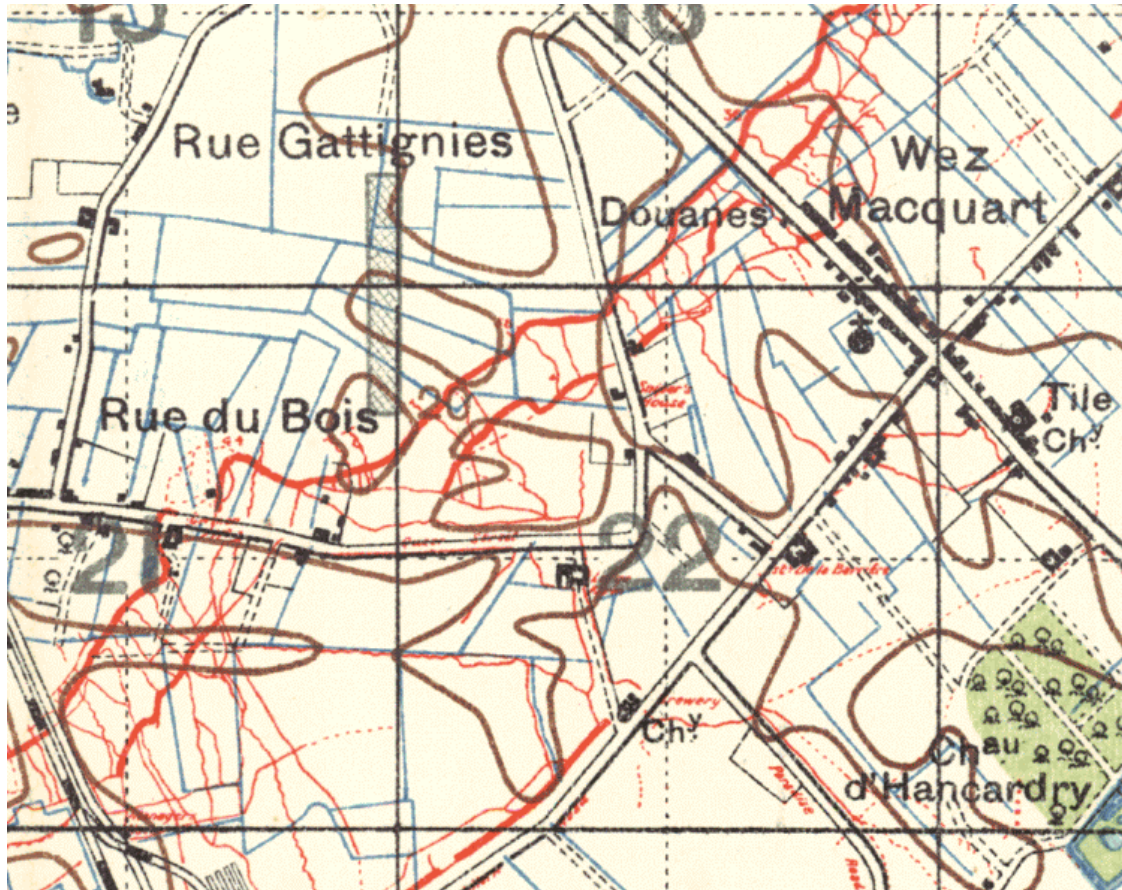
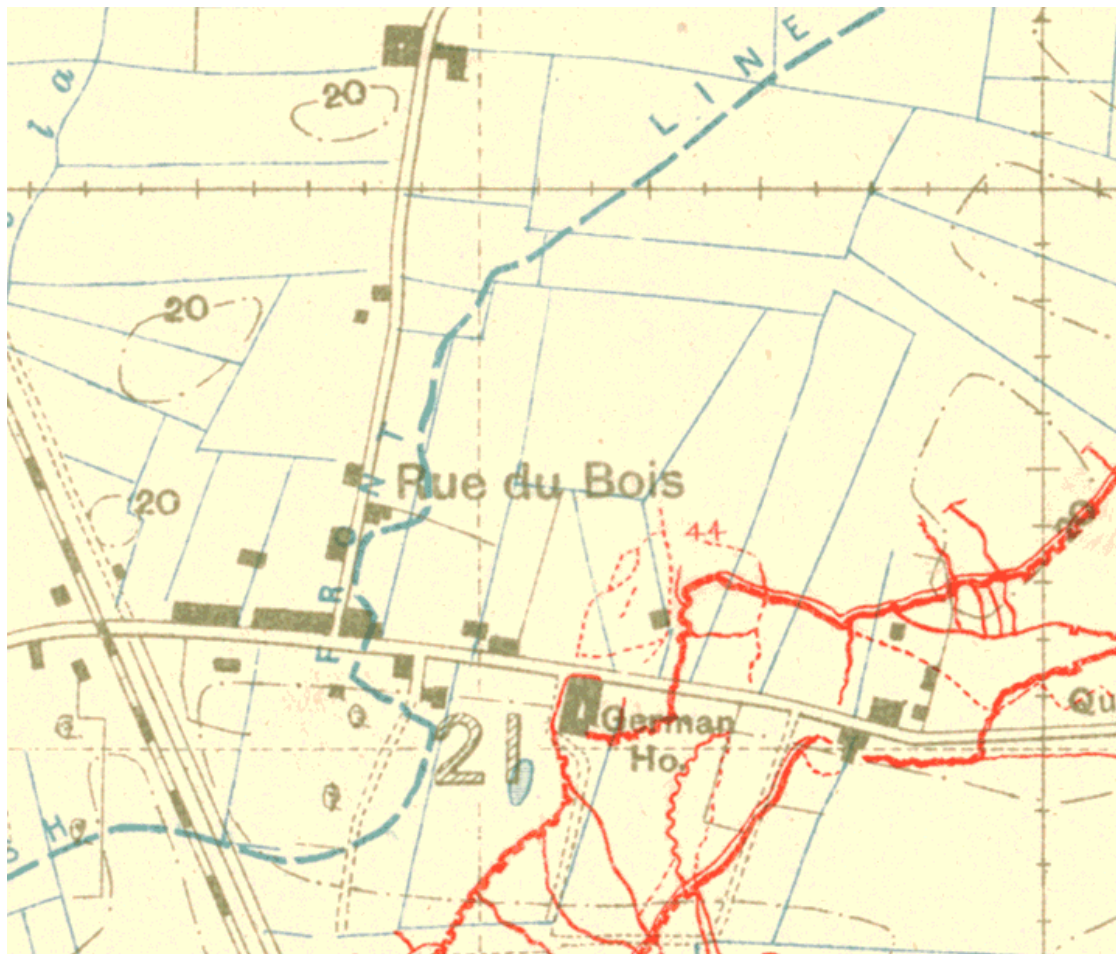


Figure 3: the story of the rest of the battle is of unrelenting German attack on the 6<sup>th</sup> Division, stout defence despite a mounting toll of casualties; gradual withdrawal; and finally holding the enemy off in front of Armentières. The final line on 2 November is shown by solid red. The 1<sup>st</sup> North Staffords were in trenches near Rue du Bois in the last days of October and early November 1914.



**Figure 4: trench mapping had barely begun in November 1914. The earliest we could find covering the Rue du Bois area dates to December 1915. There had been no major movement in this area in the preceding year so we suspect the position is rather similar to the way it had been when the battle died down. The red lines shown on this map are German trenches – the British ones are not shown.**



**Figure 5: a version of March 1916 now adds the British front line. It is likely to have been somewhere in the area shown that William Henry Plimbley sustained his mortal wound.**

According to the CWGC, “Boulogne was one of the three base ports most extensively used by the Commonwealth armies on the Western Front throughout the First World War. It was closed and cleared on the 27 August 1914 when the Allies were forced to fall back ahead of the German advance, but was opened again in October and from that month to the end of the war, Boulogne and Wimereux formed one of the chief hospital areas. Until June 1918, the dead from the hospitals at Boulogne itself were buried in the Cimetiere de L'Est, one of the town cemeteries, the Commonwealth graves forming a long, narrow strip along the right hand edge of the cemetery. In the spring of 1918, it was found that space was running short in the Eastern Cemetery in spite of repeated extensions to the south, and the site of the new cemetery at Terlincthun was chosen. During the Second World War, hospitals were again posted to Boulogne for a short time in May 1940. The town was taken by the Germans at the end of that month and remained in their hands until recaptured by the Canadians on 22 September 1944. Boulogne Eastern Cemetery contains 5,577 Commonwealth burials of the First World War and 224 from the Second World War.”

The Base Hospitals operating in Boulogne at the time of William’s death were Number 7 Red Cross Hospital; Number 7 Stationary Hospital; Number 11

General Hospital; Number 13 General Hospital and Number 13 Stationary Hospital.

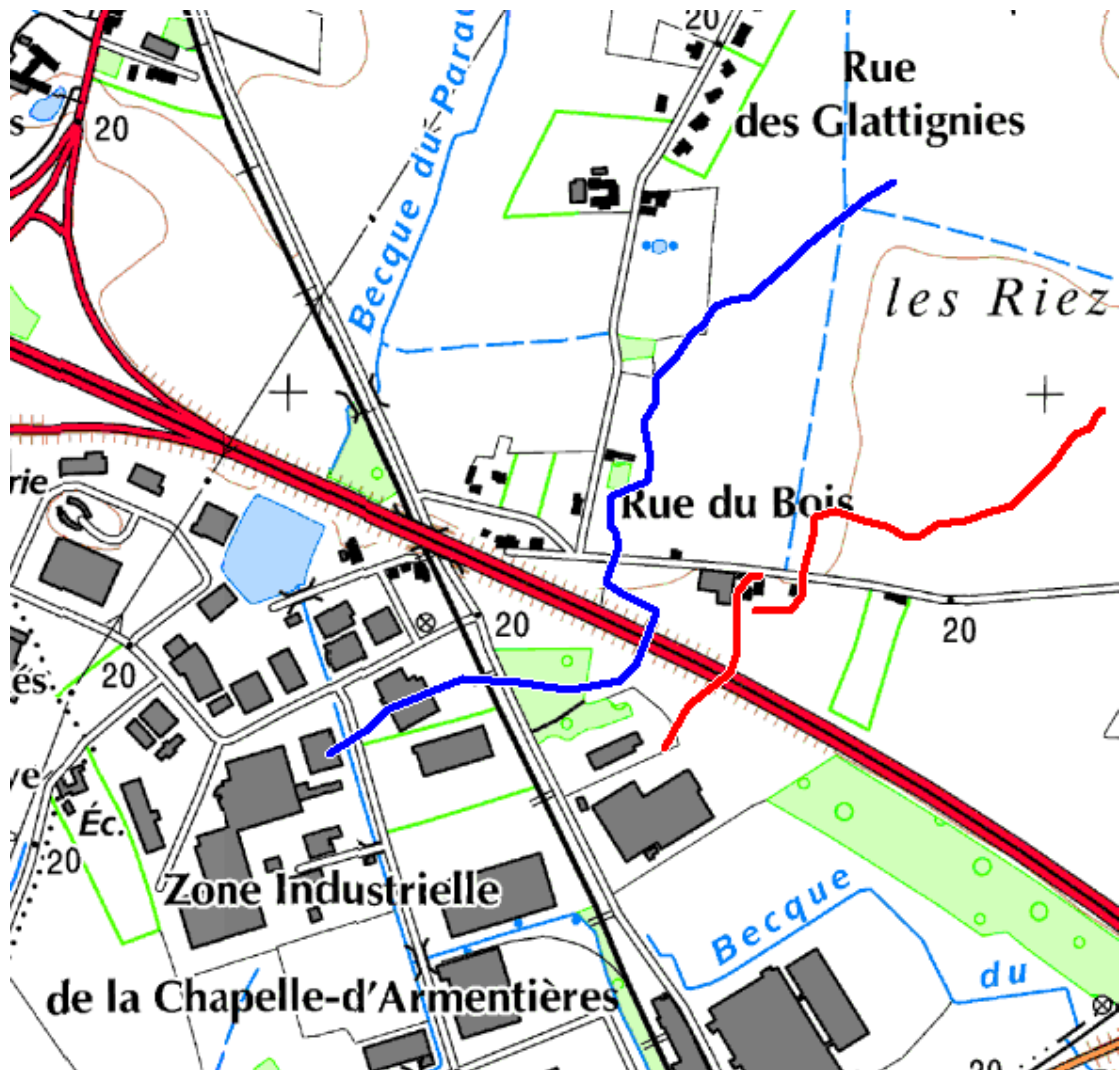


Figure 6: we have overlaid the British and German front lines onto a modern day map. The area now bears scant resemblance to the open fields of 1914: a motorway cuts through the Rue di Bois trenches and part of the lines are now below the concrete of an industrial estate ...



**Figure 7: ... although this satellite view shows signs of former trenches running through the fields east of Rue du Bois.**

### ***After William's death***

William's parents would have received official notification of his death very soon after the event: it would be unusual for this to have been more than say ten days later. It is also possible, depending on circumstances, that they had already also been informed that he was wounded and critically ill.

They would also have been sent his effects, including personal items found in his uniform and pack, together with any outstanding unissued pay. It could take several months for these things to arrive.

His service qualified William for the 1914 Star and the British War and Victory Medals: the basic criteria were that if a man left his native shore he got the British War Medal; if he also entered a theatre of war he got the Victory Medal; if he did so during 1915 he also got the Star. The next of kin did not

have to apply and in most cases these medals were despatched in 1919 (Stars) and 1921 or 1922.

It was however necessary to claim the clasp for his Star, a decoration reserved for men who had served under fire at some point between arrival overseas and the end of the First Battles of Ypres. This puts William among that select band of men known as the “Old Contemptibles”: the name came from a disparaging remark by Kaiser Wilhelm II about “Sir John French’s contemptibly small army”. It was a badge of pride, and the clasp became a requirement for membership of the “Old Contemptibles Association”.

Reuben and Mary Jane Plimbley should also have received the illuminated scroll and bronze plaque (the “death penny”) given for those men who had died on active service during the war. The plaque and scroll were released once the War Office had received a completed Army Form 5080 which was rather similar to the Final Verification Form used for the graves registration.



**Figure 8: Boulogne Eastern Cemetery is a large one with a complex layout (a plan is attached to this report). Many of the gravestones are laid flat for the ground is coastal, formerly dune, and unstable. As with all cemeteries in the care of CWGC, it is immaculately maintained.**

## **Background information**

### ***The infantry battalion***

The battalion was the basic tactical unit of the infantry of the British Army in the Great War of 1914-1918. At full establishment it consisted of 1,007 men, of whom 30 were officers. It comprised a Battalion Headquarters and four Companies.

#### Battalion Headquarters

The Battalion was usually commanded by an officer with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. A Major was Second-in-Command. Battalion HQ also had three other officers: a Captain or Lieutenant filled the role of Adjutant (in charge of Battalion administration); similarly a Captain or Lieutenant was the Quartermaster (responsible for stores and transport); an officer of the Royal Army Medical Corps was also attached.

Battalion HQ also included the Regimental Sergeant-Major (RSM, the most senior Non-Commissioned Officer) plus a number of specialist roles filled by NCO's with the rank of Sergeant: Quartermaster, Drummer, Cook, Pioneer, Shoemaker, Transport, Signaller, Armourer (often attached from the Army Ordnance Corps) and Orderly Room Clerk.

A Corporal and 4 Privates of the Royal Army Medical Corps were attached for sanitary and clean water duties; a Corporal and 15 Privates were employed as Signallers; 10 Privates were employed as pioneers (on construction, repair and general engineering duties); 11 Privates acted as drivers for the horse-drawn transport; 16 acted as stretcher-bearers (these often being the musicians of the battalion band); 6 Privates acted as officers' batmen (personal servants) and 2 as orderlies for the Medical Officer.

#### Companies

Usually lettered A to D, each of the four companies of the battalion numbered 227 heads when at full establishment. Each was commanded by a Major or Captain, with a Captain as Second-in-Command. Company HQ included a Company Sergeant-Major (CSM), a Company Quartermaster Sergeant (CQMS), 2 Privates acting as batmen and 3 as drivers. The body of the company was divided into 4 Platoons, each of which was commanded by a subaltern (a Lieutenant or Second Lieutenant). In total, the 4 Platoons consisted of 8 Sergeants, 10 Corporals, 4 Drummers, 4 batmen and 188 Privates. Each Platoon was subdivided into 4 Sections, each of 12 men under an NCO.

If asked, after his name, rank and number, a man might refer to himself as being in Number 3 Section, 1 Platoon, A Company, the 1<sup>st</sup> North Staffords. He would receive orders from his Section Corporal, would know his Platoon

Sergeant and would come into probably daily contact with the Lieutenant or Second Lieutenant commanding his platoon. He would also be familiar, at least by frequent sight, with the Captain commanding his company. In some units the relationship from this level to the men was rather closer than it would have been in the Guards, for example, although as a regular battalion things would still be fairly formal. William would have known the names of the Lieutenant-Colonel and Major in first and second command of the battalion, but may not have come into direct contact with them other than at inspections.

### Also in the battalion

Each battalion had, in 1914, a machine-gun section consisting of a Lieutenant, a Sergeant, a Corporal, 2 drivers, a batman and 12 Privates trained in the maintenance, transport, loading and firing of the Vickers heavy machine gun. These men made up two six-man gun teams.

Each battalion had a detachment at its Base Depot which did not take the field when the battalion was on active service. The base detachment consisted - in theory - of a subaltern, 2 Sergeants and 91 Privates to form a first reinforcement (to make good battalion casualties or other losses); 4 storemen, the Band Sergeant and the Sergeant Master Tailor. When the battalion went on active service, it left behind the Bandmaster and the Sergeant-Instructor of Musketry for service with the Reserve Battalion.

### Equipment

Battalion transport consisted of 13 riding and 43 draught and packhorses. The provided the power for drawing the six ammunition carts, two water carts, three General Service Wagons (for tools and machine guns), and the MO's Maltese Cart. The Signallers had 9 bicycles.

All ranks carried the Short Magazine Lee-Enfield (SMLE) .303 inch rifle. The only exceptions were officers, Pipers, Drummers, Buglers and the five men in each battalion who carried range-finding instruments. All those carrying a rifle, except the RSM and other Staff Sergeants, were also armed with the 15 inch sword-bayonet.

Other battalion equipment, over and above that carried by the man, included 120 shovels, 73 pickaxes, 20 felling axes, 8 hand axes, 46 billhooks, 20 reaping hooks, a hand saw, 32 folding saws and 8 crowbars. There was also a plethora of minor stores and spares.

The battalion also carried a certain amount of ammunition, although this was backed up by the echelons of Transport at Brigade, Divisional and Lines of Communication levels. When added together, the supply per rifle came to 550 rounds per man. The transport carried 32 boxes of 1,000 rounds, and each man could carry up to 120 rounds. The machine guns were each supplied with a total of 41,500 rounds of which 3,500 was carried with the gun, and 8,000 in regimental reserve.

### Changes during the Great War

There were significant changes to the tactical organisation of the battalion during the war. In 1914 the soldiers in a Platoon were essentially all riflemen (and their battalion had a specialist heavy machine gun section as noted above. By 1918 the Platoon had a rifle section; plus a rifle grenade section; plus a bombing (hand grenade) section; and a Lewis gun section. They worked in concert, so for example when attacking an enemy pillbox the Lewis guns and rifle grenadiers keep it under fire while the riflemen and bombers work around the flanks and get behind it. These tactics were largely forged as a result of the rapid learning based on the experience of the Somme.

The heavy machine guns had been withdrawn from the battalions to form units of the Machine Gun Corps in late 1915.

## Next steps

### ***Local press***

Now that you know a few more details of William's service it might be worth looking again at the local newspapers covering his home area in Burslem. The papers carried many snippets when the men enlisted, became casualties, went overseas, returned on leave, were given special awards or died. They also carry a surprising number of letters to the editor sent from the men and their relatives. This could be an arduous search but may be the only way to determine more regarding the detail of his service.

### ***Regimental archives***

It may be worth contacting the archives of the regiment. Although they do not hold personnel records, these archives often have items of interest regarding specific units: nominal rolls and other lists, newspaper clippings, correspondence and so on.

Staffordshire Regimental Museum  
Whittington Barracks  
Lichfield  
Staffordshire  
WS14 9PY

Even less likely to have anything that mentions William himself but which may have holdings on the battalion are the Imperial War Museum and the National Army Museum.

### ***War diaries***

The diaries of the 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade and 6<sup>th</sup> Divisional headquarters exist and are held at the National Archives. They do not name William but carry more details of the actions of September – November 1914.

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We would be grateful, if you have enjoyed our work, if you would send us some feedback that we could use as a testimonial on our website.

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