

Thomas Henry Alexander (1898-1917)

Aged
19
years



Thomas Henry Alexander was born in Himley in Staffordshire. His parents were Frederick William Alexander and Jane Eliza, nee Smith. His parents were both born in Leyton and his mother was baptized in St Mary's Parish Church. They were married in St Mary's Walthamstow and after the birth of their daughter they left Leyton to go to Margate.



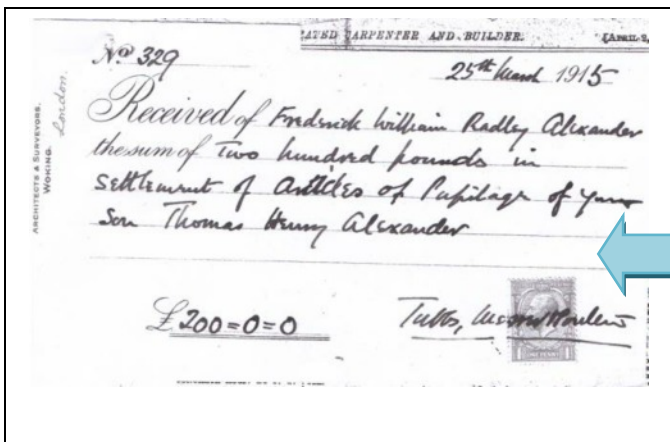
Grave E1.8

The family then went to live in Himley, near Dudley, where his father continued with his career as a gardener.

Thomas Henry, aged 7 or 8, his father, his sister Florence Jane, mother and elder brother Frederick William. This may be a picture of when they were living at Holbeach Mill, in the village of Himley. Even so young, Thomas Henry has a "twinkle" in his eye!



His father was a gardener and Thomas Henry's early years were spent in the country. At the age of 14 years around 1912, the family moved to Templeton Cottage, outside Kintbury, a village near Hungerford. Here he started work as a junior with a firm of architects. In March 1915 his father paid the large sum of £200 to a firm of architects to pay for Thomas Henry to become articled. He also seems to have girl friends, as his nephew has shown me post cards from a number of young women, especially a woman called Frances who signs herself "your sweetheart". Thomas Henry's future looked promising!



Enrolling in the army:-

The First World War started in July 1914. Thomas Henry was 16 years old and too young to join the army. However in Newbury 2 years later, on the 12th October 1916, he joined at the age of 18 as a short service recruit. His health and physical development were classed as good, he was 147 lbs and nearly 6 feet tall. He joined the Artists Rifles OTC (Officers Training Corps) and his regimental number was 762692.

The Artists Rifles was a regiment of the British Territorial Army and was a popular unit for volunteers. In 1908 it became the 28th Battalion of the London Regiment. It was a prestigious regiment and it particularly attracted recruits from public schools and universities. Out of 15,000 men who passed through the regiment during the war, 10,000 (67%) became officers. Casualties suffered by both members of the battalion and amongst officers who had trained with the Artists Rifles before being posted to other regiments were 2,003 (13%) killed, 3,500 (23%) wounded and 533 (3.5%) missing.



Training:- After joining up Thomas Henry went to Romford and Pirbright for training. He attended the Hare Hall training camp at Gidea Park near Romford. Some famous members of the Artists Rifles were the poets Wilfred Owen and Edward Thomas, who both joined in 1915. Owen also trained at the Hare Hall camp. On the 26th May 1917 he left Southampton and arrived in Le Havre on the 27th May. On the 1st June he joined his unit.

The Battle of Passchendaele- (Third Battle of Ypres)

The battle took place on the Western Front between June and November 1917 for control of the ridges south and east of the Belgian city of Ypres. The village of Passchendaele (now spelt Passendale) lay on the east of Ypres, 5 miles from a railway junction at Roeselare which was a vital

supply route for the German army. At the beginning of July some gains were made by French, British, Canadian and New Zealand troops, however the German army retained control of the ridges. On the 12th October 1917 the first attempt to take the ridge occurred when the Allies attempted to gain ground around Passchendaele by charging the German lines. The heavy rain and mud made movement difficult and the heavy artillery could not get close to the German trenches. After an Allied advance, German counter-attacks recovered most of the ground opposite the village of Passchendaele. There were 13,000 Allied casualties, 845 of whom were dead or wounded men stranded in the mud in no-mans-land. The village itself was destroyed.

The second battle was to try to recover the land lost. Supplies had to be brought in on duckboard tracks which were an easy target for artillery bombardment as the communication trenches were non-existent. There were to be attacks on the 26th & 30th October and the 6th November. Losses on the 26th were huge but the 2nd assault on the 30th was still launched and this was the attack in

which Thomas was to die. The mud was, in places, waist deep, with the bodies of the dead rotting in no- mans- land, it must have seemed like hell!

The Artists Rifles went into the line on the 28th October. On the 30th October 1917 at 5.50 a.m. the Allied attack started and huge losses were sustained in the first minutes of the men going over the top. On the left of the front the Artists Rifles were engaged in a frontal attack on two concrete German machine gun emplacements. They were thigh deep in mud and were an easy target for the German machine gunners, as the infantry was picked off as they advanced. Later the Canadian Corps had gained some land and the Artists Rifles were told to help reinforce them and make sure their flank was secured. During the attack they had to try to run through a quagmire of mud. The Artist Rifles lost nearly half their men, one of whom was Thomas Henry Alexander.

It took another 6 days before the Canadian forces captured the village on the 6th November. Although there is some dispute about total losses the BBC History Website puts Allied casualties at 325,000 and the Germans 260,000 for the 3 month campaign at Passchendaele.

The battlefield – Passchendaele.



Death:- To quote the Newbury Weekly News of the 29th November 1917.

"Mr and Mrs F W H Alexander of Templeton Cottage, Hungerford, have been bereaved of their youngest son, Thomas Henry, aged 19, who was killed on October 30th.He had volunteered to take a message from the battlefield to the medical aid post, and the enemy were heavily shelling the road he had to travel. He was struck on the head by a piece of shell and death was instantaneous. His officer has written, speaking of the excellent work he had done during the attack."

MEMORIALS

There are 3 memorials commemorating Thomas Henry Alexander.



3

**Belgium – New British Cemetery
Passchendaele (2,101 burials from autumn
1917).**

1.

In memory of Private Thomas Henry Alexander 762691, 28th Bn., London regiment (Artists Rifles). who died age 19 on 30 October 1917. Son of Mr. FWR and Mrs JE Alexander of 175 Church Rd., Leyton, Essex. Born in Staffs. Remembered with honour. (Special Memorial 3)



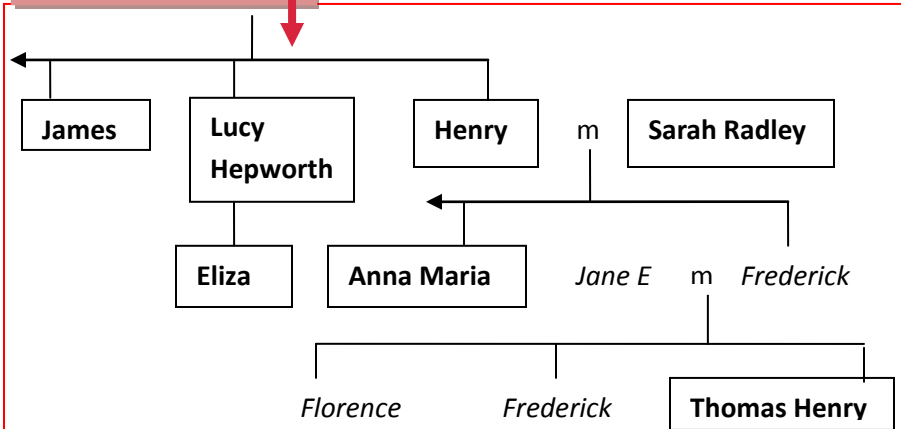
St Mary's
 Churchyard
 Leyton.

2.



The grave in the churchyard has 3 generations of the Alexander family in it. They were a horticultural family as his great-grandfather was a seedsman, his grandfather and father were gardeners and his great uncle and grandmother were both florists in Leyton. I have drawn a family tree below to explain the relationships between those mentioned on the gravestone.

Key:- the people commemorated on the grave-stone are in bold.



3.



Kintbury War Memorial in Berkshire, outside St. Mary's Church. Below is his name on the board inside the church.



References for Thomas Henry Alexander

Robert Camp nephew of Thomas Henry Alexander with grateful thanks for all his help.
 Steven Vandenbussche – Memorial Museum Passchendaele.
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 Wikipedia.

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 New Zealand History Online.
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