

Private

FREDERICK BUTTLE

6098 1st Battalion Somerset Light Infantry

Killed 13 November 1914

Aged 31

Commemorated on the Ploegsteert Memorial

Panel 3

The Buttles were originally a Churchstanton family, from at least the early 18th century - there's a Buttles Farm and Lane in Churchstanton. In 1851 Fred's grandfather, William, was serving as a Gunner in The Royal Marines Artillery. By 1861 he was back in the West Country, living at Howstead, working as an agricultural labourer, and married to Mary Ann, with one year old son Samuel.

From that point, neither William nor Samuel moved very far from home. By 1881 Samuel had married Edith Collins of Buckland St Mary, and was living with his parents and baby Annie at Waterhayes Cottage, Otterford. They had 9 children, the youngest, Katie, dying of diphtheria (caught at Brown Down School, it was suspected) in 1907.

Samuel worked as a Carter and general farm labourer. But in 1914 the family moved right out of their area to Thornfalcon. Why? Probably in pursuit of work; Fred never lived there, but his younger brother William worked in Thornfalcon.

Edith Buttle was obviously the power behind this family. When Fred was killed in 1914, it was she whom the local reporter interviewed, and again when William died in 1917. It was to her that William left his belongings in his Will, and she who signed for their returned possessions. In a photograph of her in middle age she looks formidable; 'well known local midwife' the caption tells us; 'no arguments allowed', her expression suggests. An unofficial midwife, we deduce, but skilled in all nursing tasks; her great granddaughter, Jean Carey, says that she was urged to train properly, but did not (Samuel was against it).

Fred, the oldest son, was born on 15 September 1882, and christened at Buckland St Mary on 3 December. He started school at Brown Down in March 1890, leaving in March 1894. In summarising his life up to 1914, a graphic account is given in Edith Buttle's December 1914 interview for *The Taunton Courier*, which gives a sense of what both she and Fred must have been like - and a flavour of the Edwardian style of the news reporter:

"The deceased and his parents, and the family generally, are well known 'on the hill'. The late Lance Corporal Buttle was but thirty years of age; albeit he was a typically stalwart West Countryman, and turned the scale at over 14 stone...He came home [in August 1914] on a visit to his parents for 10 days from his employment as an attendant at Fishponds Asylum, Bristol. The day after he returned from his holidays he was called up as a Reservist. He was 15 years and 2 months old when he joined the 3rd Battalion Militia in 1899. [He] saw active service in South Africa for which campaign he received 2 medals. He also served in Malta for some years. In 1912 he was employed at Wiveliscombe, where he stayed for about 2 years, and made many friends. In one letter that he sent

home from France he stated that his Regiment was having a very warm time indeed. Much sympathy is felt with the parents in their loss, and with the deceased's fiancée in the great shock she has sustained."



Private or Lance-Corporal? There's a photo of him in the Somerset County Gazette, probably in his earlier South African uniform, with his stripe displayed. Maybe this rank was lost when he went onto the Reserve list; from 1914 he was recorded as 'Private' – except in his mother's account. Another, more mature shot of him is reproduced here from *The Courier*. We also have a charming pre-War picture of him in civilian clothes. These photographs, and those that survive of his brother William, make their loss seem, even 100 years later, horribly real.

The 1st Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry, were in France by 23rd August, part of one of the earlier waves of the British Expeditionary Force. Fred's Medal Roll Card lists him as in France by 30 August; the SLI records give him as embarking on the 29th. The Battalion War Diary records that on that day 'Lieutenant Montgomery and a further party of N.C.O.s and men rejoined the Battalion': this must have been Fred's draft. Or, possibly, it's the draft who joined on 5th

September: 'First reinforcements arrived, 90 men under 2nd Lieutenant Read.'

War was declared on 4th August. The Germans had marched into France via Belgium, sweeping round to come south and head for Paris. The Belgian Army were no match for them, and the French too had difficulty resisting. Ironically, they were fighting over the same Napoleonic battlegrounds of 100 years earlier. After holding the Germans at Mons, the BEF (whose numbers were tiny) found themselves retreating southwards in a series of desperate forced marches, turning to fight when they could, to keep up with the French and protect their flank. It must have been a major shock to the SLI to be thrown into this and forced straight into retreat.

This was the situation Fred found himself in on 30 August: still retreating by forced marches in desperately hot weather, staff and supply work very off the cuff. For example, on 5th September the War Diary records: 'On the way a 2 hour breakfast halt was taken at La Ferriere and an excellent breakfast was provided for the officers by Baron Rothschild. Supplies issued tonight. Bread, chocolates, cigarettes and matches were purchased locally for the men.'

By 5th September Arthur Cook of the 1st Battalion records: 'THE RETREAT IS ENDED, but not our marching, for now we must turn round and chase Jerry for a change.' They re-crossed the Marne, but by the 11th 'the Germans seem to have got clean away and our visions of getting round them have vanished'. By this time the debilitatingly hot weather had gone, and wet weather had set in. The Somersets had a series of forced marches, on short supplies & in wretched weather, back to the Aisne. Trenches were dug in the Bucy le Long area: a foretaste of things to come for the next 4 years.

By a series of train journeys and marches and skirmishes the Battalion moved into Flanders, ending at Ploegsteert, which is essentially where they remained for the rest of the year. For them, the war was static at this point: attacks and shelling backwards and forwards, with the loss of many troops, but no real movement. The weather was terrible, and they were in marshy country. On 11th November, 2 days before Fred's death, Arthur Cook writes: 'Trenches are wet and full of water, nowhere to sit down, or lie down, only to stand up with water over your boots in inky blackness. Occasionally a shell smothers you with mud and earth. What an existence for human beings.'

Fred's death is recorded as 13th November, but the War Diary records no-one as killed that day. I wonder if in fact he may have been killed 3 days earlier, on the 10th: 'B Company lost heavily in right trench today, losing 4 killed and 6 wounded including Serjeant Willcox who was Mentioned in Dispatches. It was not however thought advisable to relieve them tonight as a German attack was expected.' I think it was not possible to retrieve these bodies, for Serjeant Willcox too has no known grave, but is recorded on the Ploegsteert Memorial.



As a postscript to Fred's death, here is the 1st Battalion Diarist's record of 25 December 1914: 'There was much singing in the trenches last night by both sides. Germans opposite us brought up their Regimental Band and played theirs and our National Anthems followed by 'Home Sweet Home'. A truce was mutually arranged by the men in the trenches. During the morning officers met German officers half way between the trenches and it was arranged we should bring in our dead who were lying between the trenches [but not Fred Buttle or Serjeant Willcox] A very peaceful day.'

Name	Regt	Rank	Engn. No.
BUTTLE	1st Bn. L.I.	Pte.	6098
Fredrick			
Serial	Unit	Post	Remarks
14	C/2/14	6	K. in A. 13.11.14
Theatre of War not entered in			
Date of entry theatre 30.8.14			

Medals such as these would have been awarded to Fred Buttle, plus Clasp for service under fire on the 1914 Star.

Fred Buttle's Medal Roll Card

Our thanks to members of the Buttle family – especially Jean Carey, Angela Dicks and Trevor Whitlock – for their photographs and memories.