

**FRED BILLING DIED ON MARCH 2 1916, EXACTLY ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO. HE
WAS BLOWN UP IN THE ASSAULT ON THE HOHENZOLLERN REDOUBT, AND HAS
NO KNOWN GRAVE.**

Lance Corporal

FRED BILLING

2565 8th Battalion Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regt)

Died 2 March 1916

Aged 33

Commemorated on the Loos Memorial

Panel 25 - 27

Fred Billing was typical of the men of Buckland who served and died in WW1: he came from a traditional agricultural background, and from a family who'd lived in the village for centuries. Yet he was unusual in having left Buckland by the age of 18, and was living with his wife and family in Surrey by the time he enlisted in 1914.

His father, John Hake Billing, was born in 1857; Billings and Hakes are there in the Buckland St Mary Registers from the 16th century. John married Jane Wilmot in the summer of 1881; Fred was born on the 13 August 1882, and christened on October 1. There was one other child, Rosa Jane, born in 1887. John lived and worked as an agricultural labourer at Wetherhayes and Tanlake. Fred was at Brown Down School, Otterford for 18 months, between May 1893 and December 1894, but there's no record of him at Buckland.

By 1901, Fred, aged 18, was working as a grocer's assistant in Bristol Road, Bridgwater, but he must have travelled south; in 1903 he was working as a Grocer's Porter in Swanage, and on 18 October he married Amy Aylwin, also working in Swanage as a parlourmaid. She was born in Sussex, but her family had later moved to Burgh Heath, near Banstead in Surrey. By 1911 Fred and Amy had moved there too, with their four children: Grace 6, Rosa 4, Fred 2 and Frank 1 month. A last baby, Ethel, was born in the autumn of 1913. They lived at 5 Wheelers Cottages on The Green in the centre of the village (now demolished – the Billings would have trouble recognising this now – to an eye used to the West Country - very suburban place). Fred was working as a builder's labourer in 1911.

War was declared on 4 August 1914; Fred volunteered (no compulsion at this stage of the war) on 7 September 1914 at Epsom. One can only imagine what his wife Amy, with her 5 small children, must have thought of this. Pride? Terror? The Surrey Attestation Register (the list of those who presented themselves to sign up, or attest) gives us an idea of his appearance. He was 32 years of age, height 5'5", weight 145lbs, chest 37" (expansion 3"), fair complexion, blue eyes and light hair.

He served in the 8th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment). This was a Service Battalion, formed on 21 August 1914, and part of Kitchener's New Army - K1 - formed specifically to fight WW1. It was part of the 36th Brigade, 12th (Eastern Division). After training at Colchester and Aldershot, it left for France in late May 1915. Fred Billing's Service Records have not survived, so much of what happened has to be surmised (all Battalion War Diaries, kept daily, normally name only officers, not other ranks). It seems probable he left for France too in May 1915. *

Royal Fusiliers Memorial, London

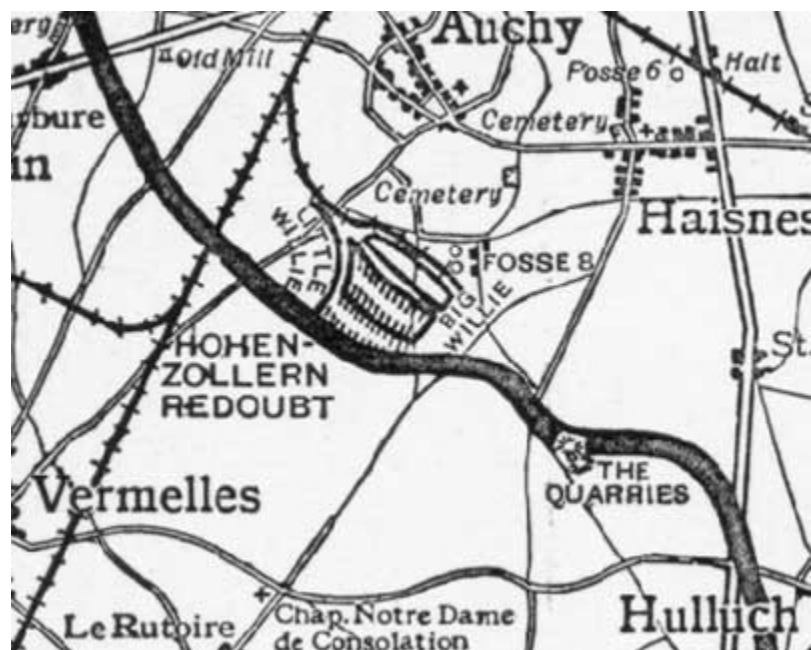
The Battalion were initially engaged in typical trench warfare. Their Division was then involved in the Battle of Loos, fought over the dead flat coal mining area north of Lens from 25th September 1915, till it petered out during October and was bogged down for the winter season. It was not a battle the British had chosen; they were not ready for a major offensive in terms of manpower or munitions, but were being committed by their Allies to a battle in an area unsuited to attack, without clear objectives.

The first day brought relative success, but, as so often, the success was whittled away and broke down in stalemate. It was also the first time the British Army had used poison gas, euphemised before the attack, the writer Robert Graves tells us, as 'The Accessory'. Losses were very heavy. At some point in this period Fred Billing attracted enough notice to be promoted to Lance Corporal.

Early Spring saw the action in which he was killed, March 2nd 1916. The extract below is taken from *The Royal Fusiliers in the Great War* by H C O'Neill (with thanks to Lewis Wood).

Notes: Little Willie was the trench leading north from the redoubt, and the north face of the redoubt itself. Big Willie was the trench along the eastern limb of the redoubt. The Chord seems to have been the trench joining the two.

The Hohenzollern Redoubt was a German position in the First World War, near the French village of Auchy-les Mines.



Source: <http://www.1914-1918.net/12div.htm>

“HOHENZOLLERN REDOUBT, MARCH, 1916

The Chord. — By this time, however, local actions had begun, and in two of them the Royal Fusiliers were engaged. The first was the action on March 2nd, 1916, at the Hohenzollern Redoubt, and was carried out by the 8th and 9th Battalions. The objective was The Chord, joining Big Willie and Little Willie. At 5.45 p.m. the 8th Battalion, on the left (or north), exploded three mines and the 9th four. The largest of the latter ("A") was intended to wreck the bulk of The Chord, but it only affected about one-third of its length.

The trench mortars and artillery were to have begun simultaneously, but the former began half an hour and the latter a quarter of an hour earlier. Immediately after the explosion of the mines 50 men of A Company of the 8th Battalion, under Captain A. E. K. Mason and Second Lieutenant Wardrop, and 50 men of B Company of the 9th, under Captain the Hon. R. E. Philipps, rushed across and seized the



part of The Chord allotted to them. Twenty of Philipps' party were buried through the explosion of the mine blowing in part of the assembly trench, and Philipps was slightly wounded in the face. But the men went forward rapidly and either cut through the wire or went over it where it was covered by the earth cast up by the explosion.

Of the party of the 8th Battalion, only Wardrop and one man reached The Chord, the rest being either killed or wounded.” This, we believe, must have included Fred Billing, blown up in the explosions.

He has no known grave; he’s commemorated on the Loos Memorial, Loos-en-Gehelle, along with 20620 other names killed between the 25th September 1915 and the end of the war. Many of these bodies lay unburied till that time, and were unidentifiable, because their sole identity disc had been taken to count casualties; later, 2 discs were issued.

On his Medal Roll Card, his date of death is given, not as March 2, but July 7. The Battalion’s Colonel, Lt Col Annesley, was also killed on that day, and is buried at Warloy-Baillon Communal Cemetery Extension, miles away on the Somme; Fred’s name isn’t mentioned there. It seems that this latter date must be a mistake, and that his presence on the Loos Memorial (see the CWGC site) is correct. As the card also gives his date of entry to France as March 6 1915 (contradicted by the known facts of his Battalion’s movements), further doubt is cast on its accuracy.

The March date is also confirmed as “officially accepted” by the recently issued UK Army Register of Soldiers’ Effects, detailing money owing to each soldier’s dependents - £3.13.10 in Fred’s case.

Record No.	Registry No.	Soldier's Name	Regiment, Rank, No.	Date and Place of Death	CREDITS			CHARGES			Date of Authority	To whom Authorised	Amount Authorised			No. of List in which advertised			
					Account and Date	£	s.	d.	Account and Date	£			s.	d.	£		s.	d.	
344421	197833	Billing Fred	8/1st Royal	Officially killed 10.16	3	13	10	3	13	10	No. 14.17	19.4.17 Mid. Army Augustus Naud	9	13	10	Repro children			
			as on 2.3.16								19.9.19 2	Mid. Army A. M.	6			P.D.			
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;"> A. F. W. 5370 JENT DATE 28.8.19 </div>					<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;"> WAR GRATUITY. 19.20 18.8.17 TRANSFER 5551 PAPER 2/1000 NO. 11441 6/14 </div>														

The UK Army Register of Soldiers' Effects – Fred Billing.

Fred's name is not only on the Loos Memorial and the Memorial in Buckland St Mary, but on at least three others: the Memorial in Banstead Church, that in St Mary's, Burgh Heath and that in the Burgh Heath Memorial Hall.

One wonders not only at the grief within the families of these men, but at how a widow such as Amy Billing, with five young children, can have coped. She at least had her family close at hand. She remarried in 1920.

(My thanks to Robert Brown, Brenda Harrison and Lewis Wood, all of the Banstead area, for their valuable input.)

*This period is well summarised online in *The Wartime Memories Project*:

"The Division landed at Boulogne; by the 6th June they were in the Meteren-Steenwerck area with Divisional HQ being established at Nieppe. They underwent instruction from the more experienced 48th (South Midland) Division and took over a section of the front line at Ploegsteert Wood on the 23rd of June 1915. They were in action in The Battle of Loos from the 30th of September, taking over the sector from Gun Trench to Hulluch Quarries, consolidating the position under heavy artillery fire. On the 8th they repelled a heavy German infantry attack and on the 13th took part in the Action of the Hohenzollern Redoubt, capturing Gun Trench and the south western face of the Hulluch Quarries. During this period at Loos, 117 officers and 3237 men of the Division were killed or wounded. By the 21st they moved to Fouquieres-les-Bethune for a short rest then returned to the front line at the Hohenzollern Redoubt until the 15th of November, when they went into reserve at Lillers. On the 10th the Division took over the front line north of La Basse canal at Givenchy. On the 19th of January they began a period of training in Open Warfare at Busnes, then moved back into the front line at Loos on the 12th of February 1916."