

Private

JOHN HENRY PAINTER

19059 8th Battalion Somerset Light Infantry

Died 29 June 1916

Aged 20

Buried

Norfolk Cemetery, Becordel-Brecourt

Grave 1.A.79

Harry Painter was born in Broadway on February 1 1896. His father John, his mother Celia and his paternal grandparents Levi and Jane all came from the villages to the east of the Blackdown Hills: Ashill, Broadway, Ilton, Donyatt. In fact Painters had been living there since at least the 16th century. It was work that brought Harry to Buckland St Mary, a village in which Painters had farmed in the past.

In 1901 his father John, slightly out of this area, was working as a farm labourer in Durleigh, Bridgwater, living at Culverwells Cottages. By then there were 4 children, 2 girls and 2 boys, Harry being the eldest. By 1911 16 year old Harry was working, and living, at Pound Farm, Buckland St Mary, for John Wyatt.

The Taunton Courier of 9th August 1916, tells us that '[Walter Pring] and [Harry] Painter joined on May 29th 1915, both going from the same farm in this parish, and great friends, and much respected in the district. Painter was not a native of this parish, but had resided here for several years. He was killed in action on June 26th [in fact the 29th], his friend witnessing his death.'

We don't know which farm they were working on when they left. Was it perhaps still Pound Farm? Or could it have been Madgeon Farm, where Walter Pring was living and working (for Sidney Dummett) in 1911? They both joined the 8th Battalion of the Somerset Light Infantry. There are no Service Records for Harry Painter, nor for Walter Pring, so we have to surmise what happened next based on the Battalion War Diaries. Harry's Medal Roll Index Card (kept to indicate what Service Medals men were eligible for) tells us he arrived in France on 4 October 1915, with the same draft as Walter.

After the Battle of Loos in the Autumn of 1915, there were no major operations for the 8th Battalion who, after refitting, moved to Armentieres. They mounted a cutting out expedition from an area known as the Mushroom on December 16 which was conspicuously well planned and successful. It seems, perhaps, unlikely that 2 recently arrived recruits would have been involved in this. They were in and out of the front line trenches during the first 3 months of 1916, and then on April 1 moved south from the Ypres Salient to the Somme, where troops were massing for the Somme attack of July 1 – another 'big push'.

There were immensely elaborate preparations going on for that attack. As well as day to day trench warfare the troops were expected to carry out these preparations, an exhausting business: digging new communication, assembly, assault and wire trenches, new dugouts, gun emplacements, and bringing up thousands of tons of ammunition and stores. And most of this work had to take place, unseen, at night. The writer C. Day Lewis describes the strange contrast: 'By day the roads were

deserted; but as soon as dusk fell they were thick with transport, guns, ammunition trains and troops, all moving up...to take their positions in or behind the lines ...Endlessly, night after night, it went on ...Yet when dawn came, all signs of it were gone.'



The Somme had been a quiet part of the line. The British had the major disadvantage of occupying the lower river land, while the Germans held the heights – the drawbacks are obvious, and became more so as the attacks proceeded and the ground was churned up to a quagmire.

On the night of the 27th, the 8th moved up to the assembly trenches; their War Diary records on the 28th: 'In the evening we took over from the 4th Middlesex, the attack having been put off 48 hours. We lost 1 corporal and 6 men in the relief.

The bombing of the enemy's position commenced 26/6 and kept up till 1/7.' This must have been when Harry was killed – the night of the 28/29th – an early casualty of the Somme attack. Walter Pring, who, *The Courier* reports, saw his death, was mortally wounded himself on July 3 in the first days of the main offensive. The 8th's Diary records for that first day of the attack, July 1, 'the leading platoons lost quite 50% going across No Man's Land'.

