

**Private**

**WALTER CHARLES PRING**

**19064, 8<sup>TH</sup> Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry**

**Died of Wounds 31 July 1916**

**Aged 21**

**Buried Bebington Cemetery, Cheshire**

**L. C. of E. 77**

The Pring family were, almost without exception, agricultural workers and, by the time of Walter's father's generation, solidly fixed in the Blackdown Hills. His grandfather Charles was born in Broadway, and his grandmother Hannah at Haselbury Plucknett, near Crewkerne. But his father George and mother Annie (nee Every, daughter of Robert Every, a lime burner) were born in Buckland St Mary.

They had seven children, 3 boys and 4 girls, all of whom survived childhood; it was WW1 that took two of the boys, Walter and William. Walter was the oldest son, his sister Emma the oldest of the family. Walter, and William, went to Brown Down School; Walter, born on 27 August 1894, entered school on the 17 March 1902, and left on 27 August 1907, his thirteenth birthday. Both boys were baptised at Otterford, Walter on 4 November 1894.

The family had moved about within the area of Buckland St Mary and Otterford, no doubt following work. In 1891, George, before his marriage, was working as a Farm Carter for William Manley, the miller, at Otterford Mill. George and Annie married at Buckland on 27 April 1893; by 1901 George was working as a Carter at Howstead; they had 5 children. In 1911 they were living at Hornsey Cottages; 4 of the children were still at home, but the 2 older girls were working away, and Walter, now 16, was living just down the road at Madgeon Farm, working as Farm Servant to Sidney Dummett.

Walter's Service Records have not survived, but we do have some pointers to what happened to him from press reports, the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diaries and contemporary accounts. *The Taunton Courier* reports that Walter and his friend Harry Painter enlisted together (in Taunton) on 29 May 1915, 'both going from the same farm in this parish, and great friends, and much respected in the parish'. We don't know which farm; for what it's worth, Harry was working at Pound Farm in 1911, and Walter, as we know, at Madgeon. On Walter's Medal Roll Card (kept as a record of what Service Medals were due to each man) is recorded the day he (and Harry Painter too) landed in France – 4 October 1915. His death certificate tells us he was with "D" Company of the Battalion.

After the Battle of Loos in the Autumn of 1915, there were no major operations for the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion who, after refitting, moved to Armentieres. They were part of the 63rd Brigade, 21<sup>st</sup> Division. They mounted a cutting out expedition from an area known as the Mushroom on December 16 which was conspicuously well planned and successful. It consisted of volunteers. It seems, perhaps, unlikely that 2 recently arrived recruits would have been involved in this. At the end of December Walter's "D" Company were taking over front line trenches when their Commanding Officer, Lt Col Howard, was killed by a sniper. 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 1 July – 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.



The preliminary bombardment began on 26<sup>th</sup> June and continued without respite till 1 July. The 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion moved up to the assembly trenches on the night of the 27<sup>th</sup>. It was during this operation that Walter's friend Harry Painter must have been killed, 'his friend [Walter] witnessing his death'; not a good omen.

The 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary continues the tale: 'At 6.30am trench ladders and bridges were put in place and an intense Artillery barrage was opened. 7.30 was ZERO Time for Assault.

7.25 Front waves of B and C Coys crawled out.'

What the Diary doesn't make plain is the disaster of those 5 minutes before zero hour when the 8<sup>th</sup> left their trenches and crawled forward in readiness: many lost, the Commanding Officer dead, and all officers except 3 lieutenants out of action. They were followed by "A" Company, and "D" (Walter's Company), the latter weighed down with supplies – bombs, picks and shovels, trench stores. Heavy machine gun fire continued to mow them down, but they pressed on to the German trenches, 'battered out of all recognition, and only [consisting] of a mass of craters'. Eventually 2 groups, both under 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenants, managed to join up and held out in a trench all night, repulsing a bombing raid. By this time, half of them were dead.

Next morning reinforcements and more senior officers arrived; counter attacks were expected and prepared for; '[we] remained in the same position all day and throughout the night of the 2<sup>nd</sup>.' Officer reinforcements arrived on the night of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup>. Attacks and counter-attacks were planned or expected, but the Battalion remained in this position till relieved in the early hours of 4<sup>th</sup> July.

It seems remarkable that Walter managed to survive until the 3<sup>rd</sup>, when he was mortally wounded. These first days of the Somme were a disaster: enormous loss of life, and nothing substantial gained. He would have been picked up by stretcher bearers, taken to an Advanced Dressing station, then to a Field Ambulance, then the Casualty Clearing Station and finally evacuated back to England. Vera Brittain, writing in *Testament of Youth* of her days as a VAD, says 'At the end of June, the hospital received orders to clear out all convalescents and to prepare for a great rush of wounded. We knew that already a tremendous bombardment had begun, for we could feel the vibration of the guns in Camberwell....On...July 4<sup>th</sup> began the immense convoys which came without cessation for about a fortnight and continued at short intervals for the whole of that sultry month and the first part of August.'

