

Kenneth Harding WILLCOCK



Born: 1897, Wimbledon, Surrey
Occupation: Possibly a carpenter
Enlisted: Wimbledon: 1914/15 (Volunteer)
Unit: 21st London Regt. (1st Surrey Rifles) (TF)
Rank/number: Rifleman: No.653323 (Also 6852)
Death: Killed in action, 8th October 1916
Detail: Kenneth died during the last stage of the Battle of the Somme. His unit was told to attack the Butte de Warlencourt, an ancient burial mound used as a German defensive position north of High Wood. To ensure surprise there was to be no prior barrage. But the plan changed and as the men advanced British guns opened up. The enemy fired and Kenneth fell dead.

Age at death: 19

Military info: On the outbreak of war 17-year-old Kenneth, desperate to serve but too young to enlist, decided to join his local Territorial battalion, the 2/5th East Surreys, who could take recruits his age. This unit was composed of men who in 1914 decided not to serve abroad, as they were entitled to do. But when conscription arrived in January 1916 this right vanished and the 2/5th began sending men to the front. That September Kenneth turned 19 and was old enough to serve in France. The 21st Londons, formerly the 1st Surrey Rifles, in 142nd Brigade, 47th (2nd London) Division, had suffered badly in an attack on High Wood on 14th July and a draft of 253 recruits from the 2/5th was sent out. Kenneth was with them. The men reached 21st Londons at Millencourt on 23rd September. The battalion were ordered to carry out a night attack on 8th October. The objective was the Butte de Warlencourt, a sinister-looking ancient burial mound that had been turned into an impregnable element of the German defences north of High Wood. To ensure surprise the men were told there would be no pre-attack barrage. At 4.30pm the unit reached its jump-off point at Starfish Trench in front of Eaucourt L'Abbaye. They were then told there would be a pre-attack barrage after all. At 8.30pm the men went over the top. They advanced 200 yards unobserved - then the British guns thundered out. The Germans, now fully alerted, opened fire and Kenneth was one of many who fell.

Grave/memorial: Kenneth's body was never found. He is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing on the Somme, at St Petroc's Church, Padstow and on the Padstow War Memorial, where his cousin Colin Harding is also listed.

Family info: Father: James Willcock, born Padstow, Cornwall in 1873. Carpenter. Mother: Florence Brittain, born Stapenhill, Burton upon Trent, Staffs in 1877. They married in 1896 and had three children, one of whom died.



This information was researched by Peter Smith, who is currently writing a book about Padstow's part in the Great War. Anyone wishing to correct errors or supply additional information can write to him at 24 Mallard Drive, Uckfield, East Sussex TN22 5PW. Also phone 01825 762226 or email smithpeter24@gmail.com

+Lest we forget+