

GREAT WAR STAINED GLASS WINDOW MEMORIALS IN KENT

No. 4: St John the Evangelist, Sidcup

Captain Cyril James Ashton

6th Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment

DOW 12 March 1918, Fleurbaix

Window: St John the Evangelist, Sidcup

Kent links: family home; school

Medals: 1914-1915 Star

War Grave: Merville Communal Cemetery

Cyril James Ashton was born in Sidcup on 19 August 1894, the youngest of three sons of Reuben and Frances Jane (née Walmsley) Ashton. Both parents were schoolteachers, the father head of an elementary school and his wife his assistant. Cyril attended Dartford Grammar School, where he was an enthusiastic member of the Officer Training Corps (OTC) for more than four years, becoming Lance Corporal. When he left school at the age of seventeen in May 1912 he joined the Head Office secretarial staff of the Union Assurance Company in London. His brothers too were clerks and they were to serve during the war, the eldest, Harold, with the Royal Garrison Artillery, being commissioned in September 1918 after serving in the ranks, and Frank as a purser in the merchant marine. Cyril, who was described as a keen sportsman and popular amongst his workmates, enlisted on 31 August 1914.¹

He joined the ranks of the 16th (County of London) Battalion (Queen's Westminster Rifles), part of the Territorial London Regiment. Many London clerks who volunteered in the first weeks of the war tended to enlist in a territorial battalion that had its headquarters close to either their homes or their workplaces. Cyril, however, did not do so. He could easily have enlisted in the 20th (Blackheath and Woolwich) Battalion, with its headquarters in Holly House, Blackheath (the closest territorial battalion to his home), or in a number of territorial battalions with headquarters close to his workplace in Cornhill, in the City. Instead, more than three weeks after the war began, he enlisted in a territorial regiment that had its headquarters in Buckingham Gate, Westminster. Perhaps some of his workmates or sporting companions had already joined this battalion, making it an attractive proposition for him?

Lord Kitchener's original war strategy was to allow the myriad non-Regular battalions—both Territorial and Service—to train for at least six months before being sent to the continent to reinforce the British Expeditionary Force (BEF).² Events, however, moved too fast and with the regular army suffering huge casualties in the first months of the war, a number of territorial units had to be sent overseas earlier than anticipated. Among the London Territorial regiments chosen to bolster the BEF was the 1/16th London Regiment, despite training being incomplete. The numbers enlisting, however, had been large enough for a second line to be formed and it was to this formation (the 2/16th London Regiment) that Ashton was posted.³

¹ Service Record, Captain Cyril James Ashton, TNA, PRO WO 339/29774 (hereafter SR, Ashton); Roll of Honour, <http://www.aviva.com>.

² In normal circumstances, eleven months was regarded as the optimum training period.

³ SR, Ashton.

He did not, therefore, go with the Westminster Rifles when they landed in France on 3 November 1914.

Instead, Ashton applied for a commission, designating the Royal West Kent Regiment as his preferred option. Supported by his old headmaster and the Vicar of St John the Evangelist, his local church, he was on 4 December 1914 awarded a commission and posted as 2nd Lieutenant to the newly-created 6th (Service) Battalion Royal West Kent Regiment.⁴ This battalion had been formed at Maidstone on 14 August and became part of 37th Brigade, 12th (Eastern) Division, which was to become a crack formation. Initial training had taken place in Colchester and Purfleet, but at the time Ashton joined the battalion was overwintering at Sandling near Hythe. The miserable conditions endured there were described by one of Ashton's fellow subalterns, the young Oxford Don Arthur Heath, in a letter to the wife of a Professor:

We were under canvas till December 3rd. We then came into huts here, and, after a desperate struggle with them, we are now leaving them for billets. The huts were badly built and not half finished. The rain comes in through the roof and the windows, and the leaks have become worse and worse, till now it rains as fast inside as out in some places, and drips everywhere. Also, it does this everyday for a fortnight now. It is a dreadful waste of money over the huts, which we probably shan't be able to occupy till February now—about a month or six weeks before we are sent off to France.⁵

Heath was too optimistic in his prediction, for the battalion moved to Aldershot in February for final training and did not land in Boulogne until 1 June 1915. Ashton, however, for unknown reasons was not part of the original group of officers to go overseas. He did not report for duty with the 6th Battalion in France until 15 December 1915 and thus missed the Battle of Loos, during which Heath was to be killed.⁶

Ashton joined C Company, then under the command of the redoubtable Capt. W.R.A. (Bob) Dawson, one of the few men to be awarded four DSOs during the war (he was also entitled to wear at least six wound stripes, including one for the wound from which he died less than a month after the Armistice). Dawson was an aggressive warrior and Ashton could not have found a better mentor to teach him the intricacies of trench warfare. He was not, however, always an easy man to serve under. In a wonderful character sketch the novelist Alan Thomas—himself a 6th Battalion officer—has shown Dawson to have been a born leader, brave as a lion—in public—and not at all intimidated by superior officers (staff and general officers were 'velvet-arsed buggers'). On the other hand, his temper could be volcanic, he did not suffer fools gladly and he was quick to find ways of ridding himself of officers who appeared weak or inefficient.⁷ That Ashton remained in C Company and was its commander when Dawson became one of the youngest battalion COs in the British Army, suggests that he passed a very daunting test in his first months in the frontline. It is ironic that Dawson's aggressiveness was to be instrumental in Ashton's death.

The 6th Battalion spent much of the winter months in the Givenchy sector, where severe weather conditions enforced a policy of spending no more than two days at a time in the line. Battle casualties were few, but sickness was rife. Then, following three weeks in Corps

⁴ *London Gazette*, 4 December 1914, p. 10303; SR, Ashton.

⁵ A.G. Heath to Lady Mary [Murray], 21 December 1914, in Paul Foster (ed), *The Letters of Arthur George Heath* (1917: n.p. n.d.), p. 37.

⁶ War Diary, 6th Royal West Kent Regiment, 15 December 1915, TNA PRO 95/1861. For the list of original officers sent to France, see C.T. Atkinson, *The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment* (London 1924), p. 113.

⁷ Alan Thomas, *A Life Apart: A Fragment of Autobiography* (London 1968), pp.57-60.

Reserve, the battalion was sent in February 1916 to the Hohenzollern sector, near Loos, where their tour of duty began relatively quietly.⁸ It is a misnomer to talk of a “trench system” at this time in this part of the line. Much of the fighting was carried out from craters or from trenches that were held at one end by the British and at the other by the Germans. Both sides were aggressive. On 6 March the battalion was in support of the 6th Buffs’ unsuccessful attempt to seize Triangle Crater from the Germans. Over the next week a bitter struggle took place among the craters. On the 8th, during a German attack from Triangle Crater on the craters held by D Company (C Company having just been relieved), Dawson was wounded, but the craters were successfully defended.⁹ The next day, after ‘very sharp fighting’ another attack was repulsed. On the 9th the battalion was relieved and did not return to the frontline until the 13th, with Ashton’s C Company being in Kaiserin Trench. The difficulties of the terrain and the mixed-up nature of the positions held on the ground are reflected in the fact that the relief led to thirteen casualties.¹⁰

On the 14th, Ashton was wounded. The War Diary describes the events of that day:

At 4am the enemy commenced to bomb with some vigour. A barrage was put up but no attack developed and situation was quiet again by 4.15am. The bombing was apparently due to explosion of a mine in a sector further to the North. C Coy relieved A Coy in the craters. Trenches cleared of much salvage and are now becoming habitable. Fine weather continued. Our snipers had a very successful day. At 7.5pm heavy bombing and trench mortar fire was opened on craters A & 2 and a few Germans emerged opposite Crater I, which our Lewis Gun successfully tackled. Artillery support was obtained and the situation became normal by 7.40pm. Remainder of night was quiet.

Casualties: killed: OR one. Wounded: Officers: 2/Lt CI Barker, 2/Lt CJ Ashton (at duty); OR: 23 (including 4 slightly, at duty).¹¹

Ashton’s wound, in the leg, was thus not sufficiently severe for him to leave his platoon and the next day D Coy relieved his company in the craters. On the 23rd, however, he was granted leave for seventeen days, which was extended for another nine after he was unwell in England.¹² He returned to the battalion on 22 April.

March was the most active month for the battalion during this period, for thereafter it spent time in a quieter sector, had rest and training and recuperated its numbers, which had fallen below 600. Towards the end of June the battalion made preparations for moving south to the Somme region. On 30 June they were camped at Bresles, now being part of III Corps. They were not part of the disastrous attack on Ovillers and La Boisselle on 1 July, which was made by 19th and 34th Divisions, but were ordered to occupy Watney St trench that had recently been heavily shelled. The next day was spent clearing the trenches of the wounded and the dead and also occupying the support trenches.

Just after midnight the battalion was given three hours’ notice of an attack to be made on German trenches south of Ovillers. According to the War Diary:

⁸ The sector was named after the massive German Redoubt or earthwork around which so much fighting took place at the Battle of Loos in September and October 1915. The 6th Royal West Kent Battalion was involved in this fighting. For the battle as a whole see, Nick Lloyd, *Loos 1915* (Stroud 2008).

⁹ Dawson rejoined the battalion in June.

¹⁰ War Diary, 6th Royal West Kent Regiment, 6-13 March 1916; Atkinson, *Queen’s Own*, pp. 156-59.

¹¹ War Diary, 6th Royal West Kent Regiment, 14 March 1916.

¹² SR, Ashton.

At 12.15am received orders for the attack. Bn left front btn, 6th Buffs in support. At 3.15am assaulted the German trenches, A and C Companies in front who had to take the first line, B and D Coys behind to take second German line. On bombardment ceasing A and C rushed the first line and took them with very little losses. B and D charged past them but only a few elements of these 2 Coys reached the second line. A counter-attack by the Germans drove back the remnants of the Battn as the supporting Battn, who had lost direction, gave no assistance.¹³

The battalion took very heavy casualties. Of the 617 men who went into action, 375 Other Ranks were killed, wounded or missing.¹⁴ Of the officers, three of the four company commanders were killed and sixteen subalterns wounded or missing.¹⁵ Among the wounded was Cyril Ashton, who this time had to be evacuated. He sailed from Boulogne to Southampton on 8 July and was taken to Worsley Hall Hospital, near Manchester.¹⁶ He had received a bullet wound in the left shoulder. It was not regarded as very serious, as the bullet had missed the clavicle. He was discharged from hospital on 4 August 1916.

Nevertheless, Ashton spent more than a year in England recuperating from his ordeal. His problem was mainly psychological, not physical. He found it very difficult to overcome the shock of battle. He had displayed from the time he arrived in England the symptoms of what at the time was popularly called shellshock but which doctors were increasingly viewing as neurasthenia or nervous debility.¹⁷ Having spent many uncomfortable months in the trenches and being wounded twice, Ashton's nerves were shattered. Even as late as November, according to an examining doctor, 'his nerves are still very shaky, he stammers badly, sleeps badly calling out in the night and has a poor appetite, having lost 6lbs in weight since the end of August'.¹⁸ The doctor advised further leave.

Ashton's recovery was slow, but it was not thought that he should be hospitalized. Spending time close to the sea, at West Looe, Cornwall and with relatives at St Anne's on Sea, Lancashire, allowed him to recover his equilibrium. By February 1917 his general condition was much improved and he joined the Royal West Kent's 3rd battalion at Fort Pitt, Chatham, on the 22nd. He was fit for home service by the next month and ready for any duty by April. He was not, however, sent overseas, but continued his duties as a Bombing Instructor, first in Watford and then in Sittingbourne.¹⁹ He finally returned to France in August 1917.²⁰ He was by now a Lieutenant and on 15 December was promoted to Acting Captain.²¹ The latter rank was officially confirmed only eleven days before he died.

Whether Ashton returned immediately to the 6th Battalion remains uncertain, for the War Diary does not mention his arrival. It is possible that either he remained at the Base or was attached elsewhere for some months. There is no mention of him in November, for instance, when the battalion took part in the 12th Division's resounding success at Cambrai, nor when subsequently the battalion was virtually destroyed in the German counter-offensive. In early December the battalion was in the process of replacing nearly all its officers, so Ashton's

¹³ War Diary, 6th Royal West Kent Regiment, 3 July 1916.

¹⁴ According to Commonwealth War Graves Commission records, 139 Other Ranks were killed.

¹⁵ Subsequently, three of the missing officers were declared dead and one other died of wounds.

¹⁶ Worsley New Hall was the seat of the Egerton family, Earls of Ellesmere. When the 3rd Earl died in 1914, the house was loaned to the British Red Cross to use as an officers' hospital. Salford University Library, http://usir.salford.ac.uk/28344/1/WNH_Bibliography_s-pages.pdf.

¹⁷ For an important discussion of "shellshock" in 1916, see Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists 1914-1994* (London 2002), chap. 4.

¹⁸ Dr CRA Sutton, 1 November 1916, SR, Ashton.

¹⁹ SR, Ashton.

²⁰ Roll of Honour, <http://www.aviva.com>.

²¹ *London Gazette*, 23 October 1917, p. 10882, 1 March 1918, p. 2617.

promotion on the 15th, to Acting Captain *while in command of a company*, might suggest that he rejoined it at that point as a replacement. This, however, must remain conjecture.

What is certain is that Ashton was with the 6th Battalion at Fleurbaix early in March 1918 when Dawson returned after recovering from yet another wound. Dawson was now commanding the battalion and, as the regimental historian writes, he ‘was determined that it should never be said that the 6th had failed to identify their opponents even if the German front line were unoccupied’.²² He immediately began to organize a full-scale daylight raid, using two hundred men. Ashton was given command. Between 4 and 8 March the raiders practised the attack, on one occasion under the eye of the Corps Commander. Their objectives were ‘to obtain as many prisoners and as much information as possible and to destroy the enemy’s defences’.²³ The attack was timed to last exactly twenty-four minutes.

Zero Hour was 5.30am on 9 March. Unfortunately, Ashton was mortally wounded just before that moment, receiving a shell wound to the abdomen.²⁴ As the only artillery fire was from British guns and as the Germans had been caught by surprise, it may be supposed that Ashton had been the victim of “friendly fire”. The raid went ahead without him and was deemed ‘a complete success’, with nine prisoners and one machine gun being captured and an estimated fifty Germans killed. One raider was killed and 18 wounded.²⁵ Ashton was evacuated to the 54th Casualty Clearing Station, but died of his wounds three days later. He was buried at Merville Communal Cemetery, Nord. Less than a month later the Germans overran the town and it was not recaptured until August.²⁶

Ashton was wounded so early in the morning and conveyed to the CCS so swiftly that the telegram informing his parents that he had been dangerously wounded was dated the same day as the raid.²⁷ The War Office frequently allowed a relative of a severely wounded officer to visit him in hospital in France, but there is no evidence that the Ashtons had the opportunity to do so. On 12 March they received another telegram informing them that their son had died.

The grieving process was punctuated by the necessary requirements of requesting an official certificate of death and obtaining probate. Ashton’s death would have been confirmed by letters from the battalion, including, almost certainly, one from Dawson, although none has survived, and by the return of his effects. These included a varied array of smoking implements, a sealed bundle of letters, a prayer book and a lucky heather. Within six weeks of his death the Ashtons were informed that he had been buried in Merville Communal Cemetery Extension (although the CWGC data says he is buried in the original cemetery).

As well as ensuring that their son was commemorated on the local war memorial in Sidcup, the Ashtons accepted the Imperial War Graves Commission offer of placing an inscription on the new headstone that was erected when the cemeteries were properly established after the war. They chose the phrase: ‘Christ’s Faithful Soldier and Servant unto his Life’s End’. This suggestion of a full Christian life was repeated when they decided to raise a stained glass memorial window to their son in the local Anglican Church, St John the Evangelist (they lived only a few hundred yards away).²⁸ The single light has an Archangel—probably St Michael as he carries a flaming sword—in medieval armour, holding an open book, with Alpha and Omega on each page: the beginning and the end. Beneath the saint on the plinth is

²² Atkinson, *Queen’s Own*, p. 347.

²³ War Diary, 6th Royal West Kent Regiment, Order No. 141, 8 March 1918.

²⁴ Casualty Clearing Station Report, SR, Ashton.

²⁵ War Diary, 6th Royal West Kent Regiment, 9 March 1918.

²⁶ Commonwealth War Graves Commission data.

²⁷ SR, Ashton.

²⁸ The photo below is courtesy of John Salmon, whose assistance is greatly appreciated.

a wreath-shaped crest of the Royal West Kent Regiment. The window's inscription, *Finis Coronat Opus* (the end crowns the work), reinforces the view that Ashton's death was both worthy and the fulfilment of a Christian life. Ashton died doing God's work.



In Proud and Loving Memory of Cyril James Ashton
Captain 6th Battalion R W R Regt. who died
of wounds in France March 12 1918. Aged 25 years

Source: ellesmerecollective.co.uk

