

ERNEST LEE RICHARDS 1890 -1915

Researched by Jean Wilkins

Ernest Lee Richards was born in the March quarter of 1890, the youngest of the seven children of William Lee Richards and his wife Frances. William, a labourer from Thorverton, married Frances Howard from Shobrooke, in Shobrooke Parish Church in January 1874. By 1881 they had moved from Rewe to Cheriton Fitzpaine, where William was working as an agricultural labourer and they already had three daughters and a baby son. The family made a further move to Stockleigh Pomeroy, where their youngest three sons were born. William continued as an agricultural labourer. By 1901 Ernest at the age of eleven years was the only child remaining at home.

In 1911 by the age of 21, Ernest was working as a waggoner on the farm of Tom Batting in Newton St Cyres. Tom Batting farmed East and West Woodley farms and was a notable farmer in the district. He served as a prominent member of wartime tribunals and the War Executive Agricultural Committee. Ernest, lodged with William and Eliza Allen and their three children in Woodley cottages. William Allen was also a waggoner on Woodley Farm. A waggoner was a respected position in the farming hierarchy being the man in charge of the horses of which he must be an expert handler. They often worked in teams and became very skilled at harnessing the horses and loading and unloading quickly. They had little spare time but typically would devote that to the horses in their charge and to keeping their harness in excellent condition.

For the Army to fully train such a horseman could take up to six months. Unfortunately, so far, we have been unable to obtain any details of Ernest Richard's military career so we do not know if he worked with horses during his service in WW1. However there was a high demand for such men.

Private Ernest Lee Richards of the 1st Battalion the Devonshire Regiment (service number 11250) was killed in action 3 April 1915 aged 26. His grave is in the Kemmel Chateau Military Cemetery which is just 8Km South of Ypres. The 1st Battalion had spent the previous five winter months holding the Front Line opposite the Messines Ridge about 10Km south of Ypres. During this relatively quiet time there were still 200 casualties and many reinforcements had to be supplied during these months, 24 officers and 850 men, nearly a complete battalion. A change of location took place in early April as Territorial formations arrived. There was a move left up the line nearer to Ypres. There was no big offensive at this time but casualties could be expected from sniping and regular shelling.