

THE BRITISH ARMY'S FIRST GREAT WAR CASUALTY

PRIVATE JOHN PARR

4th BATTALION, THE MIDDLESEX REGIMENT (DUKE OF CAMBRIDGE'S OWN)

John Parr was born on the 19th July 1897 at Finchley, London the son of Edward and Alice Parr.

At the time of the 1901 Census the family were living at No.36 Lichfield Grove, Finchley.

Edward was a milkman aged 41, Alice, his wife aged 38, their sons, Edward, also a milkman was aged 18, Charles aged 11, John aged 3 and their daughters Catherine aged 16, Alice aged 15, May aged 13 and Jane aged 5. There were also three lodgers living with the family, Benjamin Topley, a general labourer, aged 60, Arne Hayt, a gardener aged 18 and Percy Hollis, a plumber aged 19.

By the time of the 1911 Census the family had moved to 52 Lodge Lane, North Finchley. The household members living there were Edward, his wife Alice, their 25-year-old daughter Alice who was single and employed by her own means at home, John and Alfred, both attending school. At what age John left school is unclear but he worked initially as a butcher's boy and then as a caddie at the North Middlesex Golf Club. Possibly, wanting to improve his career prospects he decided at the age of 15 to join the Army.



Grave Of Private John Parr

He enlisted at Mill Hill on the 7th August 1912 into the Middlesex Regiment, for a Short Service (All Arms) engagement. [7 years with the Colours and 5 years in the Reserve, or, if the man completes his 7 years with the Colours while beyond the seas, then for a period not exceeding one year, with the Colours, and the remainder of the 12 years in the Reserve]. He gave his age on attestation as 18 years and 1 month and his trade as a Golf Caddie and that he belonged and was still serving in the Middlesex Special Reserve. His surviving damaged service record of seven pages, described him as being 5ft 3-inches in height, weight 120lbs, a chest measurement of 33½-inches with 2-inch expansion, with brown eyes, brown hair, a fresh complexion, a scar on his left shin, very good eyesight, had been vaccinated and gave his religion as Church of England. After completing his medical examination, he was declared fit for Army service and

his attestation was certified and signed by Major J.H. Hall, commanding 57th R.D. Recruiting Area on the 7th August 1912. On the 20th September 1912, Private, No.14196, John Parr was posted to the 4th Battalion, Middlesex Regiment.

The Middlesex Regiment (Duke of Cambridge's Own) was established when the 57th Regiment and 77th Regiment of Foot were merged in 1881 under Army Reforms to form the 1st and 2nd Regular Battalions. Two more regular battalions, the 3rd and 4th were created in 1900.

Great Britain mobilised its armed forces on the 4th August 1914 for the war against Imperial Germany. Under pre-war plans it was intended to send six divisions and one cavalry division to France. However, a decision was taken to send four, the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 5th Divisions and one Cavalry Division. The 4th Division was despatched at the end of August and the 6th Division in early September.

The 4th Battalion, the Middlesex Regiment, at the time of outbreak of the First World War was stationed at Devonport, part of the 8th Brigade in the 3rd Division. They travelled by train on the 13th August to Southampton, where they boarded the S.S. Mombasa for France, arrived the following day at Boulogne and marched to a rest camp. Two days later they entrained for Aulnoye and from there marched to billets at Taisieres. After further marching in the warm August weather, via Monceau, Maubeuge the battalion arrived they arrived at the village of Bettignies.

The 4th Battalion had a small section of cyclists for reconnaissance duties. They were sent ahead of the battalion to look for any unusual activities and report back their observations. John Parr was one of these cyclists. The battalion had established themselves without incident in the village of Bettignies and posted men to watch for any indication of the presence of enemy activity. On the 21st August, John Parr and another cyclist were detailed to cycle towards the village of Obourg, north-east of Mons to try and locate the proximity of German troops. There remains a great deal of uncertainty as to the precise sequence of events and as to how and where Pte John Parr met his end. It is believed that the two cyclists came upon and German reconnaissance patrol of Uhlans. It was of vital importance that the discovery of the enemy was brought to the attention of their commanding officer. While his fellow cyclist speedily cycled back towards Bettignes, John Parr remained to hold off the patrol. During an exchange of rifle fire, he was shot dead, the first British soldier to be killed on active service on the Western Front in the First World War. He was 17 years of age.

He was probably buried by the Germans in a marked battlefield grave. After the Armistice his body was recovered by the Imperial War Graves Commission and re-interred in the St

Symphorien Military Cemetery, Hainaut, Belgium. Grave Location: Plot I, Row A, Grave No.10. The cemetery is situated 2-kilometres east of Mons. It was established by the German Army for the burial of British and German soldiers killed at Mons. The cemetery remained in the possession of the Germans until the end of the war. There are 229 Commonwealth and 284 German casualties of the First World War buried or commemorated in the cemetery of whom 105 are unidentified.

Private George Edwin Ellison of the 5th (Royal Irish) Lancers who was killed on the 11th November 1918 lies buried in the cemetery. He was 40 years of age and was the son of James and Mary Ellison and husband of Hannah Ellison of 49 Edmund Street, Bank, Leeds. He is believed to have been the last British casualty of the First World War. Grave Location: Plot 1, Row B, Grave No.23. Another soldier buried in the cemetery is Private George Lawrence Price of the 28th Battalion, Canadian Infantry, who was also killed on the 11th November 1918, aged 25 years. He was the son of James and Annie Price of Port Williams, King's County, Nova Scotia and is believed to have been the last Canadian casualty of the war. Grave Location: Plot V, Row C, Grave No.4. Members of the Wessex Branch, Western Front Association visited St Symphorien Military Cemetery during the 2011 battlefield tour and paid their respects at many of the graves in this cemetery.

John Parr's father, Edward received £3-4s, the residue of his sons pay on the 19th August 1915. In April 1919, the Records Office at Hanwell sent to him the following letter:-

To Mr E. Parr

52 Lodge Lane

North Finchley

In order that I may be enabled to dispose of the plaque – (bronze memorial plaque) – and scroll in commemoration of the soldier named overleaf – (John Parr) – in accordance with the wishes of His Majesty the King, I have to request that the requisite information regarding the soldier's relatives now living may be furnished on the form overleaf in strict accordance with the instructions printed thereon.

The declaration thereon should be signed in your own handwriting and the form should be returned to me when certified by a Minister or Magistrate.

(Signed) Officer in Charge Records

Edward duly filled in the Army Form listing the relatives of John Parr:-

(Father) Edward Thomas Parr	52 Lodge Lane N. Finchley
(Mother) Alice Rosina	52 Lodge Lane N. Finchley
(Son) Edward Thomas (36)	52 Lodge Lane N. Finchley
(Son) Alfred Frederick (16)	52 Lodge Lane N. Finchley
(Daughter) Catherine Alice (34)	6 Hall Street N. Finchley
(Daughter) Alice Rosina (32)	6 Hall Street N. Finchley
(Daughter) May June (30)	4 Avenue Rd. N. Finchley
(Daughter) Violet Jane (23)	52 Lodge Lane N. Finchley

Edward signed the form which was certified by a Minister of the Church and dated 14th April 1919 and returned it to the Records Officer.

In June of that year John Parr's War Gratuity payment of £5 was sent to his father Edward Parr. John had served in the Army for 2 years and 15 days – From the 7th August to the 12th August 1914, 2 years 6 days Home Service: From the 13th August 1914 to the 21st August 1914, 9 days with the British Expeditionary Force.

In addition to the Bronze Memorial Plaque and Scroll, Edward Parr also received his son's 1914 Star with Clasp, British War Medal 1914-1920, and the Inter Allied Victory Medal 1914-1919. John Parr is commemorated by a memorial paving stone at 52 Lodge Lane where he lived and by a plaque erected at the North Finchley Golf Club in August 2014. A Tommy Statue to commemorate his name was erected in Lodge Lane in 2019.

On the 17th August 2021 at an auction held by Dix Noonan and Webb in London, John Parr's 1914 Star with a copied clasp and rosette was sold for £17,000. The estimated auction price was £1,800-2,200.

Natasha Rook raised over £5,000 by public subscription to try and acquire John Parr's 1914 Star, and if successful she intended to donate the medal to the British Section, SHAPE, International School at Mons, Belgium. Undoubtedly, she was surprised at the final bidding price for the medal. She has since proposed that the money, which was donated to her, be used to create a memorial garden to John Parr at the International School.

Sources

Ancestry ~ www.ancestry.co ~ John Parr; WW1 Soldiers Documents WO 363; WW1 Medal Index Cards.

Natasha Rook ~ www.gofundme.com ~ Fundraiser For John Parr's 1914 Star.

Dix Noonan Webb ~ www.dnw.co ~ Auction Sale John Parr's 1914 Star.

Wikipedia Web-Site ~ www.wikipedia.org ~ John Parr.

War Time Memories Project ~ www.wartimememoriesproject.com ~ 4th Battalion Middlesex Regiment.

Commonwealth War Graves Commission ~ www.cwgc.org ~ John Parr; George Price; George Ellison.

Memorial to John Parr ~ www.barnet.gov.uk ~ Tommy Statue.

British Battalions In France & Belgium 1914 By Ray Westlake. Published by Leo Cooper in 1997 An Imprint Of Pen & Swords Books. ISBN 0 85052 577 2.

Roger Coleman

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