

*This is the Fifty-First of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church*

## **THE BATTLE OF ARRAS**

Here I am going to look further at the names on our War Memorial and in particular to look at how the next three men from the village all died in April 1917, during various phases of the Battle of Arras. These men were:

Private Basil Reeve	6 <sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment
Private George Wilfred Jarrett	4 <sup>th</sup> Battalion Bedfordshire Regiment
Private Alfred Bush	4 <sup>th</sup> Battalion Suffolk Regiment

### **The Tunnels under Arras**

*The following is based on an article by Yves Le Maner, Director of La Coupole History & Remembrance Centre*

Arras was under allied control, but it was just a few kilometres from the German lines and it formed a salient in the allied front line. An ambitious plan was drawn up for a combined Anglo-French action to breach the German line. The idea was for the British and Empire troops to make a major attack on the German trenches to the east of the city. This was to be combined with a large-scale attack in the French sector. This way it was hoped that the German reserve troops would be drawn in several days before the start of the French assault. The main British worry was how to concentrate a large number of troops near to the front line without arousing the suspicion of the enemy, and the British general staff drew up an innovative plan whereby New Zealand engineers would create a vast underground network of tunnels through which troops could pass to come up directly in front of the German lines. By the end of March 1917 the tunnelling works were complete and on the eve of the battle the caves and quarries under the town contained more than 24,000 soldiers. The network of tunnels was divided into two main sections (see map).

In the first section, the Scots and the English gave their galleries familiar names such as Glasgow and Manchester, whilst the second section under the Ronville district was the exclusive territory of the New Zealanders who named their galleries after their home towns such as Wellington. The total length of the tunnels was 19 km, and they were very sophisticated with kitchens, water supplies, latrines and electric lighting throughout. They also contained a fully-equipped 700-bed hospital.

### **The Germans decided to retire to the Hindenburg Line**

But, following their heavy losses on the Somme the Germans had taken the decision to shorten their lines and over a nine month period they had built a fearsome new defensive position behind the existing front line. The British called this new line the Hindenburg Line, and by 18 March 1917 the Germans had completed their withdrawal behind it. This seriously complicated the Allied plans almost on the eve of the planned offensive. For the Germans had totally destroyed the infrastructure in the salient before withdrawing, even poisoning the wells, so the Allies had to rebuild roads, bridges and railways in the abandoned area before they could start their assault.

### **The death of Private Basil Reeve**

Basil Reeve was in the 6<sup>th</sup> Royal Warwicks, which was in the 143<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, 48<sup>th</sup> (South Midlands) Division. We know from the inscription on his grave in the Tincourt New British Cemetery that he died on 1 April 1917. The villages of Tincourt and Boucly were occupied by British troops in March 1917 during the German withdrawal and, from May 1917 to March 1918, Tincourt acted as a centre for Casualty Clearing Stations.

The 48<sup>th</sup> Division was certainly involved in harrying the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line. British patrols had begun to detect the withdrawal of German infantry from the Somme in mid-February 1917 and a cautious pursuit began; this halted only as the Hindenburg Line itself was approached. We know that the 48<sup>th</sup> Division occupied Peronne on 18 March 1917. By 1 April the British and French Armies were ready to begin operations against the few villages still occupied by the Germans west of the Hindenburg line. It must have been around this time that Basil Reeve lost his life.

### **The assault**

After a four-day intensive bombardment, the planned assault began on 9 April 1917 at 5.30 a.m. with part of the British 1<sup>st</sup> Army, comprising four Canadian Divisions, setting out to conquer Vimy Ridge. The Battle of Vimy Ridge lasted from 9 – 14 April.

Also in the 1<sup>st</sup> Army was the 63<sup>rd</sup> (Royal Naval) Division in which **George Wilfred Jarrett** served. This Division took part in the First Battle of the Scarpe which took place at the same time as the assault on Vimy Ridge and ended on 14 April. Here the British Divisions made significant progress on both sides of the River Scarpe. They went on to fight in the Second Battle of the Scarpe (23 -24 April), but George Jarrett died on 15 April so it would appear that he died as a result of the First Battle.

### **The Arras Memorial**

Now George Jarrett's name appears on the Arras Memorial which commemorates almost 35,000 servicemen who lost their lives in the Arras sector and have no known grave, but there is another name from our War Memorial which also appears there, namely that of **Alfred Bush** who died on 23 April. He was in the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion the Suffolk Regiment and, at the time in question this battalion was part of the 98<sup>th</sup> Brigade which was in the 33<sup>rd</sup> Division. Now the 33<sup>rd</sup> Division also took part in the Second Battle of the Scarpe, so it would appear that Alfred Bush died during this battle.

### **The outcome**

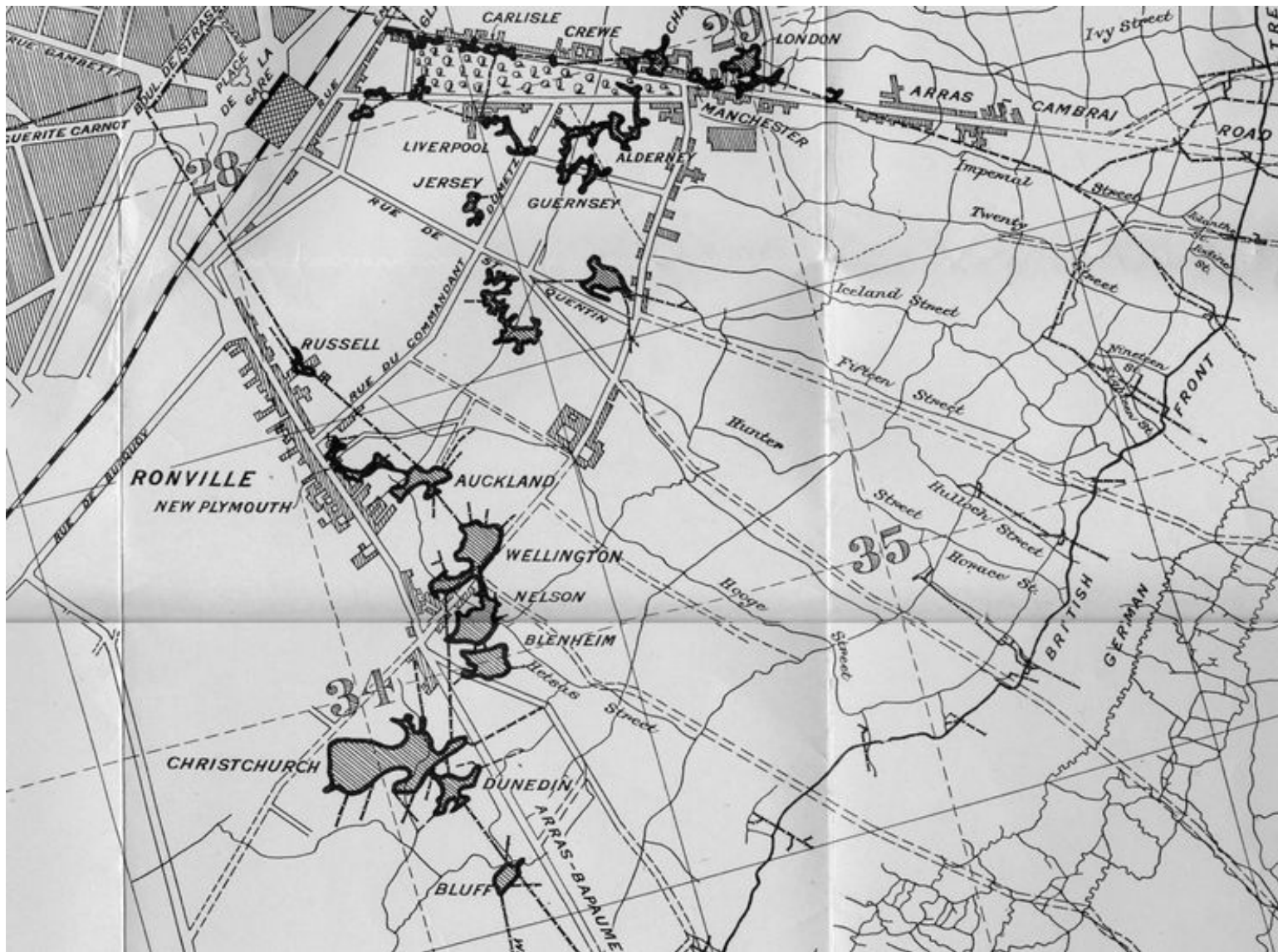
There were major gains on the first day, followed by stalemate. The battle cost nearly 160,000 British casualties and about 125,000 German casualties.

### **Their families**

Basil Reeve was born in Lyng in about 1897, son of Thomas and Eliza Reeve. Thomas was a platelayer on the railways and they had an older son, called James. In 1901 they were living at Port Row which is not far from St Margaret's Church. By 1911 Basil was a farm labourer aged 14 and the family was living in King's Head Road.

George Wilfred Jarrett was born in Swanton Morley in 1892, and his parents were Arthur & Harriet Jarrett. In the 1901 census Arthur was an agricultural worker and the family was living in Mill Street. In the 1911 census Arthur was a wagoner and was married to Margaret; George was aged 19 and was a farm labourer. They were now living at The Oaks, Bylaugh

Alfred Bush was born in Dereham in about 1895 and his parents were John Bush, a bricklayer, and Sophia Ann Bush. By the time of the 1911 census John Bush was a widower; Alfred was aged 19 and was a roadman for the Urban District Council. There was also an older brother, Robert aged 21. They were living at 22 Becclesgate, Dereham. When Alfred enlisted at Bury St Edmund's, his name was given as Alfred George Bush.



The tunnels under Arras