

**A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF
ARTHUR JAMES PURFIELD**



**'C' COMPANY, 8TH BATTALION
QUEEN'S OWN ROYAL WEST KENT REGIMENT
72ND INFANTRY BRIGADE
24TH DIVISION, XI CORPS, 1ST ARMY**

INTRODUCTION

This essay is based on the talk which Margaret and I have given to various groups. It tells the story of Margaret's father over a year from September 1914. The essence of the story is contained in a diary in which Jim Purfield recorded his experiences each day. Using the diary as a basis, and supplementing the story with the official history of the Battalion, plus other formal war records, we have constructed this factual drama. It tells the story of the journey that led him into the greatest battle the world had ever known – the Battle of Loos.

Jim Purfield never spoke of his war experiences, his diary was found only after he died in 1975, when it was discovered among his papers.

EARLY LIFE

Jim Purfield's father, William Purfield, kept the village shop in Cobham, Kent from the end of the 19th century until 1938. He married in 1887 the daughter of the previous shopkeeper, Charles Edward Snoad – thus carried on the business from his father-in-law.

The shop was, and still is, a timber framed structure built around 1411. Originally it was used as a Monk's visiting hall, as part of Cobham College, a home for five priests adjacent to the parish church. The house was converted into a two storey dwelling, probably in the reign of Elizabeth 1st, and altered for use as a shop around 1840.



The shop in Cobham.

Jim Purfield was born at the shop in 1893, the only boy, but with four sisters. (A fifth sister died aged 4). The 1911 census records that 9 people lived at the shop – the family plus a servant girl, plus a grandfather.

Jim went to the Mathematical school in Rochester, a daily train journey from Sole Street. In his youth, he learned to shoot at the local rifle club, and no doubt, assisted in the shop. Here he is, with his father, setting off to deliver goods around the village, perhaps to Cobham Hall – the birth place of The Ashes. Jim was fanatical about cricket.



On leaving school, his father thought he should have a 'proper' training as a grocer, so he was sent to be an apprentice with W B Moss and Sons, a chain of family grocers in Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire. So, at the outbreak of war in 1914, he was living in lodgings in Letchworth. He was 21 in July that year.

TRAINING

Jim Purfield enlisted on September 9th 1914 at the Territorial Hall, Hitchin, but came back home to join a new Battalion – the 8th Battalion, Queens Own Royal West Kent Regiment. He took a friend with him, Herbert Baines. We don't know how they knew each other, possibly a church connection.

As the story unfolds, his diary extracts will be shown highlighted, and written out exactly as he wrote them.

September 11th 1914. Left Letchworth for Maidstone with H Baines. Arrived 2pm and found barracks very much overcrowded with a very mixed lot – some of all sorts. Met Banks and O Coleman, also George Streeter and the brothers Fred, Harry and Walter Swain. Slept in Drill Hall with very ‘lively’ company – a memorable night.

The men he mentions would have been school or village friends. And so the training began. The next day, September 12th, he records:

Heavy rain and we were bundled into tents.

The official record says ‘.....the men were got into some sort of order and marched in simply pouring rain to a fieldwhere there was no accommodation at all, and they were told to stay under the trees to keep dry. By this time every man was wet through, and it is small wonder that many men took the train home.’

The new recruits left Maidstone almost immediately for Shoreham by Sea where the real training began. Over the next months, the 800 young men were moulded into a unit, with many hours of drill, parading, marching and trench digging. Jim seems to have enjoyed the years training which took place at Shoreham, Brighton, Worthing, Aldershot and Redhill (where they dug trenches intended to protect London in the event of an invasion).

Eventually they were given uniforms, and the wooden imitation guns were swapped for service rifles, and so shooting training could begin. And all the time, trench digging and trench warfare were practised.

Jim was made up to Lance Corporal at the end of October. He shot for the Battalion in Brigade competitions, and from his diary record, seemed to enjoy the years training.

Tuesday July 13th 1915. Reveille 5.30. No early parade with recruits on account of muddle over breakfast hour. On range and ‘rapid loading’ at 10.30 and again in afternoon. Very decent shooting. Played bridge in evening and drew and cleaned service rifle (Mark III short Lee Enfield). No letters. Came out in orders as full Cpl. to date from June 25th and transferred to C company. (Appealed against this last).

Wednesday August 18th 1915. Turned out 7o’c. Paraded 9o’c for trenching. Marched to Chobham common close to Sunningdale and dug from 12 – 3 on a communication trench. Then packed up and set out for home, arriving about 6pm. After dinner retired early. PC from Una.

Most of the daily diary entries finish with a reference to letters or cards received or sent. It is remarkable that the postal service continued to operate efficiently. Whether in camp, or travelling across France, or at the front line, letters and parcels were delivered daily.

FRANCE

On August 30th, 1915, a year after enlisting, they left for France from Southampton. On landing at Le Havre they had their first experience of travelling in cattle trucks – 40 men and 8 horses per truck. It was a slow 17 hour journey across northern France via Rouen and Abbeyville to Montreuil, until they reached the little village of Hucqueliers where they were billeted for 3 weeks.

On September 21st they left, and in four overnight marches, with full kit and food, they marched over 80km east to the front line. From Huqueliers to Dennebroeucq to Isburgues to Bethune, and then to the battle front near the village of Loos.

This is Jim Purfield's record of those four days and nights.

Tuesday 21st September 1915. Under orders to leave Huqueliers – paraded at 8o'c and drew fresh ammunition and 'emergency' biscuits. Then went to Prugirs as 'patients' for RAMC, but several of us sent back – not needed. Bought a few 'necessaries' and did some washing before dinner and had 'muster parade' in afternoon. Marched out at 6pm and reached Croix at 12.45 and kipped in field. Grand night, but march under Major C rather too forced, considering weight of pack. Had had 'enough' on arrival. No letters.

Kipping in the field meant sleeping in the open with only their own individual waterproof sheets as cover – another heavy item of kit they each carried. The officers slept in an adjacent barn, but the record says '.....it was so plentifully supplied with fleas that many wished they had remained in the field'.

The village they were now in was Dennebroeucq.

Wednesday 22nd September 1915. After fairly decent kip turned out at 8o'c. Went foraging and found some eggs for breakfast. Rifle inspection and nice bathe in stream in morning. Spent afternoon mending socks and shirt – my first real attempt at darning! Brilliant results! Marched off at 6o'c under C.O. reaching Isburgues at 2o'c and were billeted in brewery. Men 'nursed' much better during the early stages, but last 2 hours were very tiring. Everybody 'done up' at finish – my feet behaving jolly well. No mail in.

So the next day was spent at Isburgues.

Thursday 23rd September 1915. Had decent kip on floor until 10o'c then turned out for breakfast and cleaned rifle – and self. Had another kip before dinner in straw-store until 3.30. Mail in during afternoon. Nice letter from Kit, Nell, Una. After dinner packed up ready to resume the weary way. Rations and tea about 5o'c and parades at 6o'c but only marched about 3 ½ miles to Brusnes. Storm came on and after some hanging about we were billeted in cart sheds. Had very enjoyable full nights sleep. Sent pc to (Dad).

Friday 24th September 1915. After grand nights kip turned out for breakfast at 8o'c. Rifle inspection during morning. Heavy artillery firing going on all round. Two mails in

during day bringing letters from 'Erbie, Morley, Wilmott and very nice one from Edie P. Heard in afternoon that the grand slam was to come off during weekend and that we were to be in it. Moved off at 6.20 and marched to Bethune, 13 miles – not so tiring as other marches. Billeted in large barracks and had decent kip. No chance to get letters away.

The march to Bethune was particularly difficult. A policy change at high level meant that the battalion mobile cookers were taken away. Each man carried his pack and his greatcoat and would also carry one 'iron ration', one extra cheese ration, a piece of bread and cheese and some cold pea soup.

They had already been scantily fed and kept short of water on their long march, and of course, marching at night and trying to sleep by day is tiring and frustrating.

So, they were already hungry, thirsty and weary before this battle began.

The roads to the front were narrow, difficult to find in the dark, and congested with traffic going both ways with no 'up' and 'down' route. So supply vehicles, ambulances, ammunition trucks were all milling around as some 40,000 soldiers congregated at an area which became famously known as 'the Lone Tree'. To make things worse there was a mighty storm overnight on the 24th.

The battle was planned to be **the** decisive attack to quite literally end the war. General Haig, the Army Commander, had insisted that before the battle started he should have in place sufficient trained, battle hardened fresh troops as an immediately available reserve; a second wave to go into battle after the first wave had broken through the enemy lines.

Instead, he had battalions like the 8th QORWKs who were newly arrived from England, weary and hungry; trained but with no front line battle experience. This was the first time in the war that volunteer soldiers were pitched into the battle. All previous engagements had been with the standing army of professional soldiers.

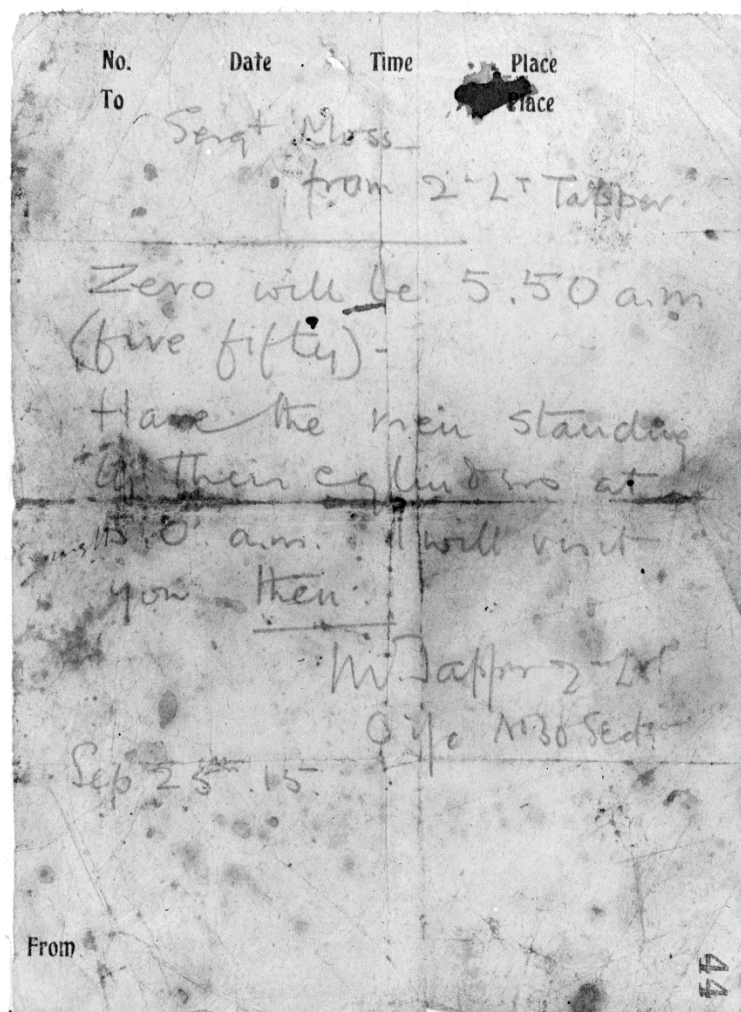
Jim Purfield and his hungry and weary colleagues were unknowingly moving towards a disaster.



In the four days and nights that the battalion (and many others) were moving towards the village of Loos, the British heavy guns were continuously bombarding the German lines. One of the purposes of this barrage was to destroy the belts of barbed wire that were constructed in front of the German trenches. This photograph shows that line of wire – up to 20 metres deep – prior to the battle.

So, on Saturday September 25th 1915 at 5.50am, the Battle of Loos started. Just north of the village of Loos, in the area where the 8th Queens Own would be engaged, it was mainly battalions of Scottish regiments that led the attack on the first day.

This was the first time that the British used gas in an attack. It was intended to be crucial to success, but was in fact a disaster. Over 150 tons of chlorine gas canisters were moved up to the front. They were spread out along the front line trenches with pipes screwed together to point towards the German lines.



This is the order issued for the gas to be released. It should have blown towards the German lines and stopped the German defenders as the British troops went into the attack. But the wind dropped. Furthermore, the front line was not straight, and even if the wind remained in an appropriate direction, it would be wrong for some parts of the line. The greenish yellow gas hung about in no man's land, and in some cases drifted back over the British lines. Furthermore, as the gas was released, the pipes

and valves froze, so the troops couldn't switch off, dismantle and move the canisters to new positions as planned.



This remarkable picture shows the British troops on that day, trying to attack through their own gas cloud. They were wearing crude flannel gas hoods which were so clumsy, and steamed up so quickly that many took them off, and were consequently gassed. Nearly 3,000 men were affected, or killed by our gas on that day.

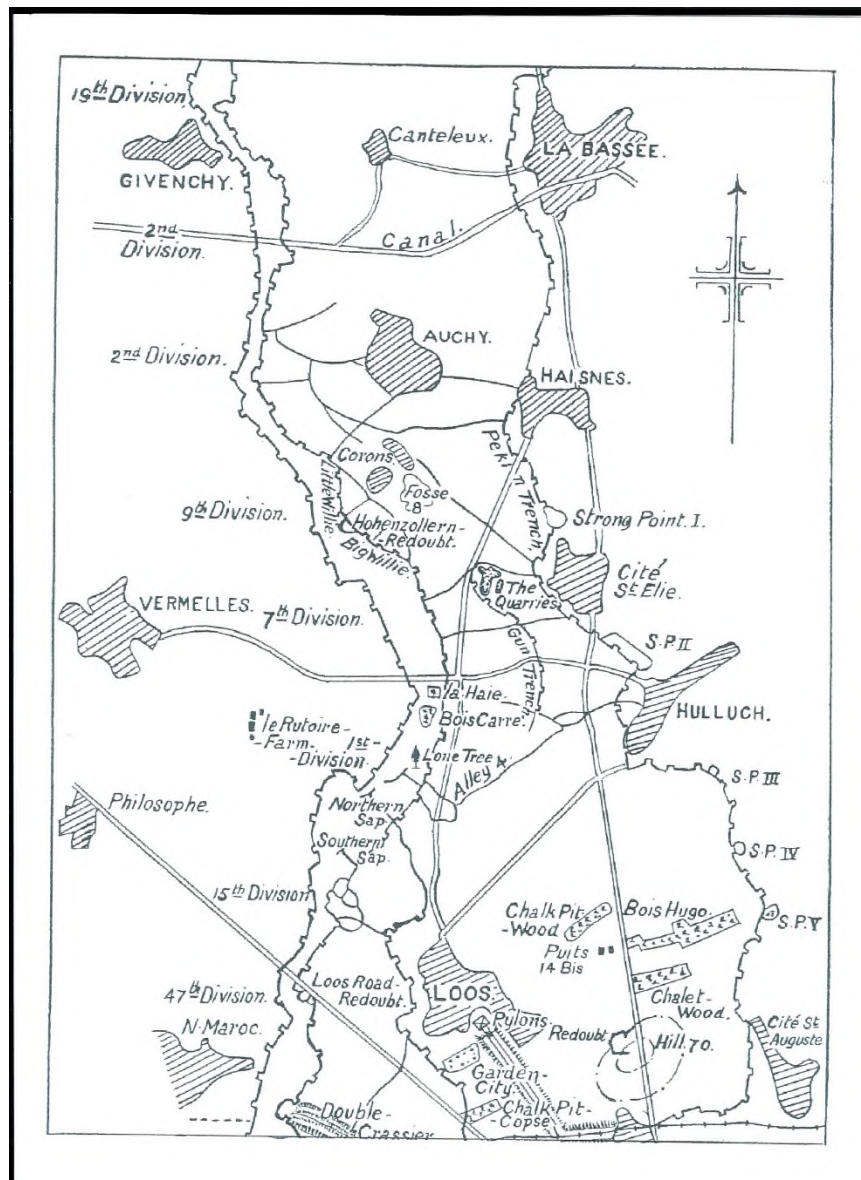
Nevertheless, gains were made, and the front line edged forward, although crucially no dramatic breakthrough of the German line was achieved.

Meanwhile, Jim Purfield and his battalion had marched to the village of Vermelles where they rested by the roadside, observing the turmoil of activity as men and supplies moved forward, and injured and dying men were moved back to safety.



This is an aerial photograph of the front line trenches that day. Spotter aircraft were very much part of the battle scene in 1915.

This drawing shows the positions that day.



Jim's battalion were at Vermelles in the middle left of the map. The area of interest is the land sweeping across and down from Vermelles, between the villages of Hulluch and Loos. A place of particular interest is the 'lone tree', marked just below the Bois Carre. It was so called because it was the only tree left standing in the area, and it became a rallying point for the troops.

Saturday September 25th 1915. Turned out at 8o'clock and went into town and had breakfast. Most classy town we've struck so far – very smart shops etc. Later started letter to Mum but unable to get it away on account of sudden move at 11.30. Marched about 6 miles, then rested at British original position close to heavy guns. Good news from the firing line – Gs on the run everywhere. Advance on Hill 70 at dusk in artillery formation – very little firing and bit much hanging about in wet weather. Occupied trenches overnight and did little digging.

But on reaching the enemy front defence line they found that the barbed wire protecting it was still intact.



This photograph shows that wire on that day, with British dead lying entangled in it.

What more hopeless situation could they have possibly encountered? When the order for the attack had been given, it had been assumed that the enemy wire had been obliterated by the artillery bombardment, and a path through made by the first attack the previous day.

But here, after a disciplined advance of some 2km, Jim's battalion, and the others in the Brigade, were faced with a thick belt of uncut wire, swept by artillery, rifle and machine gun fire from 3 directions. The situation was hopeless.

The remnants of the battalion struggled back to where they had started from. Jim Purfield however was unable to return. His diary for that disastrous day reads:

Sunday 26th September. Not much doing at dawn but lately were shelled pretty heavily. Good work by our artillery after which we advanced on hill close to Hulloch. Ultimately got caught in proper trap in front of barbed wire by cross fire from L and R flanks. Stuck it for a time, losing heavily, then had to retire losing many more to m. gun and artillery fire. Awful time, but boys stuck it grandly and behaved splendidly. Lost the battalion myself and wandered around for rest of day in reserve trenches trying to find them again. Spent night in dugout in evacuated trench.



This photograph is of that captured German trench where Jim spent that night, surrounded by British dead. The horror of that situation can only be imagined. Lost overnight in no mans land, in the company of dead and dying men, some his friends, a target for snipers.

Monday 27th September. Wandered about early looking for battalion – without success. Later learned that they had been relieved overnight and ultimately found them 1 ½ miles from dressing station. Mustered about 350 all told, many friends missing including Geo.S, Fred S and Baines. All company and platoon officers gone. Stayed where we were all day and marched out of range and spent night in field near Noeux. Slept under tarpaulins near station with J Rogers – very cold. No definite news of any of the casualties. Sent letter to Mum.

We will never know what was in that letter to Mum; how he expressed his horror of the carnage he had witnessed, or whether he simply reassured his family that he was still ok.



The men in this photo had survived this day, and were returning to their billets.

In the attack that day 24 of the 25 officers of Jim's battalion were killed or wounded. Of the 900 other ranks, 580 were killed or wounded. The attack that day gained no ground. The battle and the slaughter continued for several weeks. Overall in this one battle of Loos, there were more than 61,000 casualties. Of these, 7,766 men of the British force died.

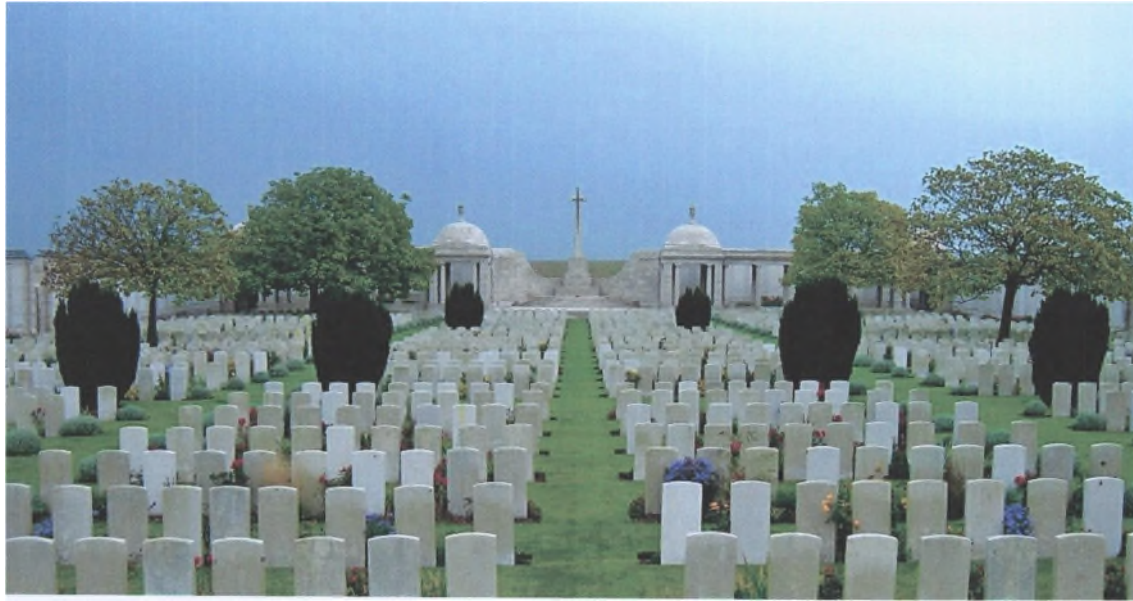


All the surrounding villages suffered; this is the village of Loos after the battle.

On Sunday October 3rd, one week after Jim Purfield's battalion had been shattered, Brigadier General Mitford said at the Brigade church service '*.....I should like all of you who know the relatives of those who are no longer with us to tell them how gallantly they fought and how nobly they served their country, in whose service they fell.....it is a great honour to have had the chance of commanding such troops on service, and I shall never forget the ground around Hulloch village.*'

Jim Purfield recorded in his diary:

Sunday 3rd October. Turned out about 80°c and went to orderly room at 90°c. Brigade church parade at 11 – very real service at same time as last Sunday's battle. Good address from Chaplain touching on our lost pals. Afterwards stayed for Holy Communion with PRB and others. In afternoon and evening wrote letters and did Orderly Sergeant duties. Kipped in fairly early and had 'comfy' sleep. No mail. Pay out in morning (rec. 20fr).



This is the Loos memorial cemetery known as Dud Corner because of the number of dud shells found when the cemetery was built. It is one of several around the village of Loos and it commemorates 20,000 casualties, both in individual graves and memorial wall panels. Jim's friend Herbert Baines who went with him from Hitchin to enlist, and who was killed on that Sunday, is commemorated on a wall panel here.

Many poignant verses were written by men who endured and survived the horrors of war. This poem was written after this battle.

The dead men lay on the shell scarred plain,
Where death and the autumn held their reign,
Like banded ghosts in the heavens grey,
The smoke of the battle died away.
The boys I knew and loved are dead,
Where war's grim annals are writ in red,
In the town of Loos in the morning.

Jim Purfield of course survived. The remnants of the battalion moved up to Ypres. New troops were drafted in; the battalion retrained and was engaged in the continual trench warfare on the Ypres front. On November 3rd, just six weeks after the Loos battle, Jim Purfield was struck in the head by shrapnel, and he was returned home for an operation. (His diary says 'O lucky Jim'). He recovered and returned to France, we think in January 1916, and fought there until the end of the war. He was in action in the Somme offensive in 1916, and was awarded the DCM for conspicuous gallantry at Ypres in 1917.

But that's another story!



Jim Purfield, in March 1963

J Alistair Riach 2016