

## High Wych History – 27

### Johnny and Joe Holden: two brothers in arms

Ernest John Holden commonly known as Johnny and his brother Joseph Sydney (Joe) were born in High Wych the sons of Margaret whose maiden name I have not been able to trace. Margaret married twice. Her first husband was Thomas Holden, with whom she had seven children. Thomas died in 1898. By 1901 Margaret was registered as a widow and seamstress. By 1911 she was married to George Springham, a widower himself, by whom she had another 2 children. In 1911 Joseph was 14 and working at a nursery. Ernest, one year younger, did not yet have a profession listed.

Joe joined the army in 1915. He may have lied about his age; 21 it said on the form. More serious however was the fact that he was deaf, a fact which is not mentioned on the form signed by local dignitary Edmund Barnard and countersigned by an “approving officer” whose name I could not decipher. Should he even have been allowed to join? Whatever was the case, Joe joined the labour corps and survived the war. He may have been involved in digging trenches. In 1920 he was awarded a pension on the grounds of his deafness which was “aggravated” by war. The pension which was granted for all of 17 months amounted to 16 shillings a week. Attempts were made to have this reviewed but these failed.

When Ernest (or rather Johnny) joined I did not find out. It is quite possible he joined around the same time as his older brother He was in the second battalion of the Bedfordshire Regiment. Johnny was amongst the 20.000 soldiers who lost their lives on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916, the first day of the battle of the Somme.

Let me quote the regimental diary:

***The early morning of July 1st was hazy and from our positions we could not see the German positions. At 7.30 a.m. (ZERO Hour) the general advance commenced, led by the 17th and 20th Battalions Kings Liverpool Regt, the 2nd Battalion. Bedfordshire Regiment being in support and the 19th Bn. Kings Liverpool Regiment in Reserve. The Bombardment has been so successful that very little resistance from Rifle Fire took place, but most of the casualties were sustained from Shell Fire.***

Later on it says:

***The 3rd wave attacked for the purpose of cleaning up the German dug-outs and trenches. These were split up into small parties of an N.C.O. & 5 men, each told to work up defined sections of enemy trench. This was successfully accomplished and about 300 prisoners and 4 Machine Guns were taken, this work completed, the men rejoined their company.***

Still later on:

***Battalion under heavy shell fire during the day and night.***

Contrary to what the diary said, opinion along the line differed and many thought the bombardment had not been a success. Johnny was wounded in the advance and taken to a nearby clearing station where he died: another victim who fell on what is referred to as the worst day ever for the British Army. Johnny is buried at the Cerisy-Gailly Military Cemetery near the Somme



**Amongst Johnny Holden's effects sent home after his death, was a photograph of Frances Emily (Frankie) Nottage. The two had been corresponding and were most probably sweethearts. Johnny's picture is on the left, Frankie's on the right.**

Brother Joe stayed on in the army until 1920. On 16<sup>th</sup> October 1926 Joe Holden married Elizabeth May Blackaby at St. James's Church High Wych. For many years he worked as a gardener with the Buxton family at the Manor of Groves. He passed away in May 1964.

Daughter Norah told me that one day as she was watching television with her dad, a programme came on about the first world war. The Menin Gate at Ypres was shown. "I saw Johnny there" Joe said. So the brothers met whilst away in the army. The story seems to indicate that the brothers were involved in two theatres of war: Ypres and the Somme.

Sources for this article were: Norah Holden, Peggy Holden, Jeanette and Bill Fretton, Ancestry.co.uk, Bedfordregiment.org.uk and Wikipedia. I have also been able to use a booklet produced in 2008 by Dave Harvey, a Leventhorpe History teacher and a team of students. That research will become essential to my WW1 themed articles. I'm sure I will quote from it again. Finally I checked "The Somme day by day", by Chris McCarthy. However the High Wych History Project still needs your personal contributions, memories, stories and photographs as well as your criticism be it positive or negative. Get in touch!! Contact me at: [theo@vandebilt.co.uk](mailto:theo@vandebilt.co.uk) or phone me at 01279 725468



Johnny's war medal

The Cerisy-Gailly Military Cemetery, site of Johnny's grave

Ref. No. *24/92407* Date *25 OCT 1920* *Sgt I*

**FIRST AWARD—SOLDIER. A**

Name *HOLDEN Joseph*  
 (Surname first)  
 Regiment or Corps *102 Coy Robin Exp Bde*  
*R.N. Exp*

Date of Disch. *29 2 20* Regl. No. *7411*  
 Demob. *29 2 20*  
 Disemb. *29 2 20*

Address *Hght Wyck, Lambeth, S.W. 16*  
*Auto*

Rank for Pension *5* Year of Birth *1899*

Nature of Disability Code No. *42*

Disability: *Deafness* 1. *99%* 2. *99%* 3. *99%*

Warrant and Article *Art 10 sub 19*

Nature of Award *Good*

% of Disability.	Weekly Rate.		Date of Commencement.	Dn Ex
	Man.	Allowance for Wife and Children.		
<i>40%</i>	<i>16-0</i>	<i>- -</i>	<i>1-3-20</i>	<i>11-19</i>

Gratuity Amount *5*

Marital Status *S*

Year of Birth of Wife

No. of Children { Males..... } Yr. of Birth, eldest.....  
 { Females..... } Yr. of Birth, youngest.....



Joe Holden in the late fifties with grand daughter Alison

*2RB9/489/13*  
*Revised data*  
*Apr 15-6*

Joe Holden's pension award form