

## 65947 Sapper Alfred George Gibson



Alfred was born at Avelshay on Rousay on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1894, the third son of farmer George Gibson and Annabella Gibson (née Logie). The oldest Gibson brother, James, left Rousay for Canada and settled in Gull Lake, Saskatchewan, while the second brother, John, worked on the family farm as the ploughman. When Alfred left school, he completed an apprenticeship as a carpenter. However, he still lived at Avelshay and helped out on the farm.

Alfred's service record shows that he enlisted in Kirkwall on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1915. He had been given a Notice to encourage him to enlist by RSM Thomas Bond of the Orkney Royal Garrison Artillery, who travelled through the islands recruiting young men into the Army. Alfred passed a medical in Kirkwall and travelled to Chatham, the main base of his preferred regiment, the Royal Engineers. He passed a trade test there and was enrolled as a carpenter on 13<sup>th</sup> February, with his pay at trade rates.

Alfred probably returned home to spend a couple of days with his family on Rousay during his week's embarkation leave, before he crossed to France on 27<sup>th</sup> September 1915. The Battle of Loos was then a couple of days into its grim fortnight-long struggle in Artois that cost the lives of a dozen Orcadians, most in New Army Scottish units. Alfred did not join a Scottish division, when he joined 130<sup>th</sup> Field Company, RE. In early 1915 it had joined in England a New Army Division, the 25<sup>th</sup>, composed of infantry battalions raised in the Midlands and North-West England.

Alfred crossed to France with 25<sup>th</sup> Division in September, then northward to the French-Belgian border. 25<sup>th</sup> Division spent several months in the relatively quiet Ploegsteert-Armentières sector. 25<sup>th</sup> Division moved into reserve in early February 1916 around the village of Outersteene, where it remained for over a month. After a short rest, it was busy training there in trench warfare, but also for future offensive action.

Alfred's service record does not state when he received the gun-shot wound to his head from which he died on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1916. It does state that he died then while being treated in 13 General Hospital, Boulogne and that he was "buried by Graves Registration Unit No 4 Grave No. 2934 on 20.2.16". When Alfred's photo was published in The Orcadian's "Our Roll of Honour" a few weeks later, its caption stated: "... as we have already reported, was wounded in action on 12<sup>th</sup> February, and died in No. 13 General Hospital, Boulogne on 16<sup>th</sup> ultimo".

When a soldier was wounded in the trenches, he passed through an aid post and on to a field ambulance close behind the front line (still within shell-fire range). If stabilised there at a dressing station, the wounded soldier was transported by ambulance to a Casualty Clearing Station. The CCS was a large, well-equipped medical facility that could carry out serious operations and handle up to 1,000 casualties at a time (situated out of regular shell-fire range). Only after a wounded soldier had been stabilised at a CCS, although many died there and were buried nearby, was he transported (usually by rail) to a General Hospital. British hospitals were usually situated in, or just outside, coastal towns, to allow easy transport back to the UK for further treatment or recovery.

If Alfred's death on 16<sup>th</sup> February was after a wound on the 12<sup>th</sup>, he had probably only just arrived in the Boulogne Hospital. His wound was most likely received a few days earlier than the 12<sup>th</sup>, just before his unit left the trenches. He was probably working at night building a strong-point, or laying out barbed wire in front of either the front or reserve trench line.

Alfred Gibson was only 21 years-old when died of wounds in France. He is now buried in Grave VIII.D.55 in Boulogne Eastern Cemetery, near the centre of the coastal town. George Gibson of Avelshay lost not only his son Alfred in the Great War. George's brother, Alfred Gibson of Langskaill, who had moved to Manchester to work as tailor, was killed aged 40 on 12<sup>th</sup> October 1916, while he was serving with the Seaforth Highlanders in the Battle of the Somme.

