

FREDERICK WEBB

Pte. 15068, 2nd Battalion, Prince of Wales' Leinster Regiment (Royal Canadians)

Died of wounds, Friday, 27th October 1916, Barlin, France

Howfield Cottage, next to Pirbright Lock, was the lock-keeper's cottage and is only just in Pirbright parish, which is why Frederick Webb's name appears on Brookwood and Pirbright War Memorials.



His father, Edward John, was no stranger to waterways. On the night of the 5th April 1891 in the census, he was a Harlington-born boatman, moored up in a narrow boat at Southall on the Grand Junction Canal. With him were wife Margaret Matilda, born nearby at Norwood, son Edward

William and baby Mary Matilda, probably born on the canal and christened nearby.



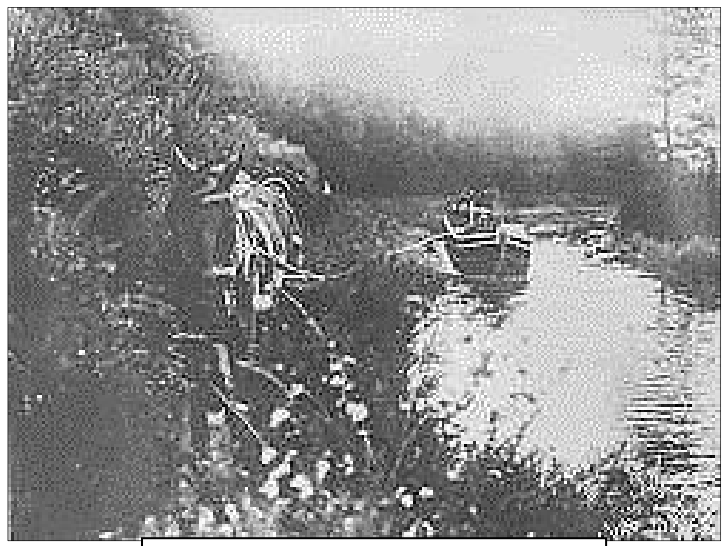
A late 19th century canal christening at Long Buckby, Northants. *Photo - The Waterways Museum*

One other child, Rosa Jane, was born in Middlesex before the family moved to Pirbright in about 1895. A bargee's life was notoriously hard and the prospect of raising a larger family in the tiny cabin may not have appealed to Margaret, so they came to Henley Park Laundry (now Stream Farm House) for a short time before moving to Lock Cottage, where Frederick was born on October 29th

A CANAL MYSTERY.
 Mr Coroner G. F. Roumieu held an inquest on Tuesday afternoon at the Cricketers, on the body of a man unknown, who was found drowned in the canal on Sunday.—Mr W. Roots was chosen foreman of the jury.—Charles Brown, labourer, of Pirbright, deposed that on Sunday morning, at 8 o'clock, he saw a young man who told him there was a jacket in some bushes near the lock. Witness proceeded to the spot, and found there a jacket, a strap, and a piece of cord, lying under an oak tree. On looking into the water, witness saw a hat on the weir-sill. The lock-keeper fetched his drag, and the body was recovered close by. Deceased had a coat and waistcoat on when taken from the water.—P.S. Marshall said the coat found among the bushes might have been worn over the other one.—John Webb, lock-keeper, deposed to recovering the body, which was just above the lock, right under the wall. Deceased was fully dressed, and had injuries over the right eye and on the nose. Witness had not seen him about there previous to the occurrence.—P.C. Hardy stated that he was called about nine o'clock on Sunday morning and found deceased lying on the towing path. He searched the body, and found the hoe produced in deceased's coat pocket. Deceased was wearing a small brown jacket, dark cord trousers, a cotton shirt, brown socks and lace boots. A brown felt hat was found in the water. Deceased was apparently about 60 years of age, and had sandy-grey whiskers.—Dr L. C. Harston said he was called to see deceased on Monday evening. Over his right eye was a wound extending down to the scalp in depth, which had been caused either by a blow or a fall, at all events 24 hours before death. There was an abrasion over the nose, probably caused at the same time. On the inner side of the right knee was an abrasion of old standing. Deceased had probably been dead 24 or 30 hours when taken from the water.—The Coroner having summed up, an open verdict was returned.

1896, the first of the children in Pirbright. In April the next year, a body was discovered in the canal, with Edward John involved (*left*). Sadly, there were a number of fatalities both in the canal and on the railway.

The older children went to Pirbright School from Lock Cottage and, for a short time in 1901, from Stanford Cottages, near the Royal Oak, when Edward was a builders' labourer, until, maybe connected to the decline of the canal, later that year the family moved to Connaught Road, when the children transferred to Brookwood School, Frederick starting there in 1901.

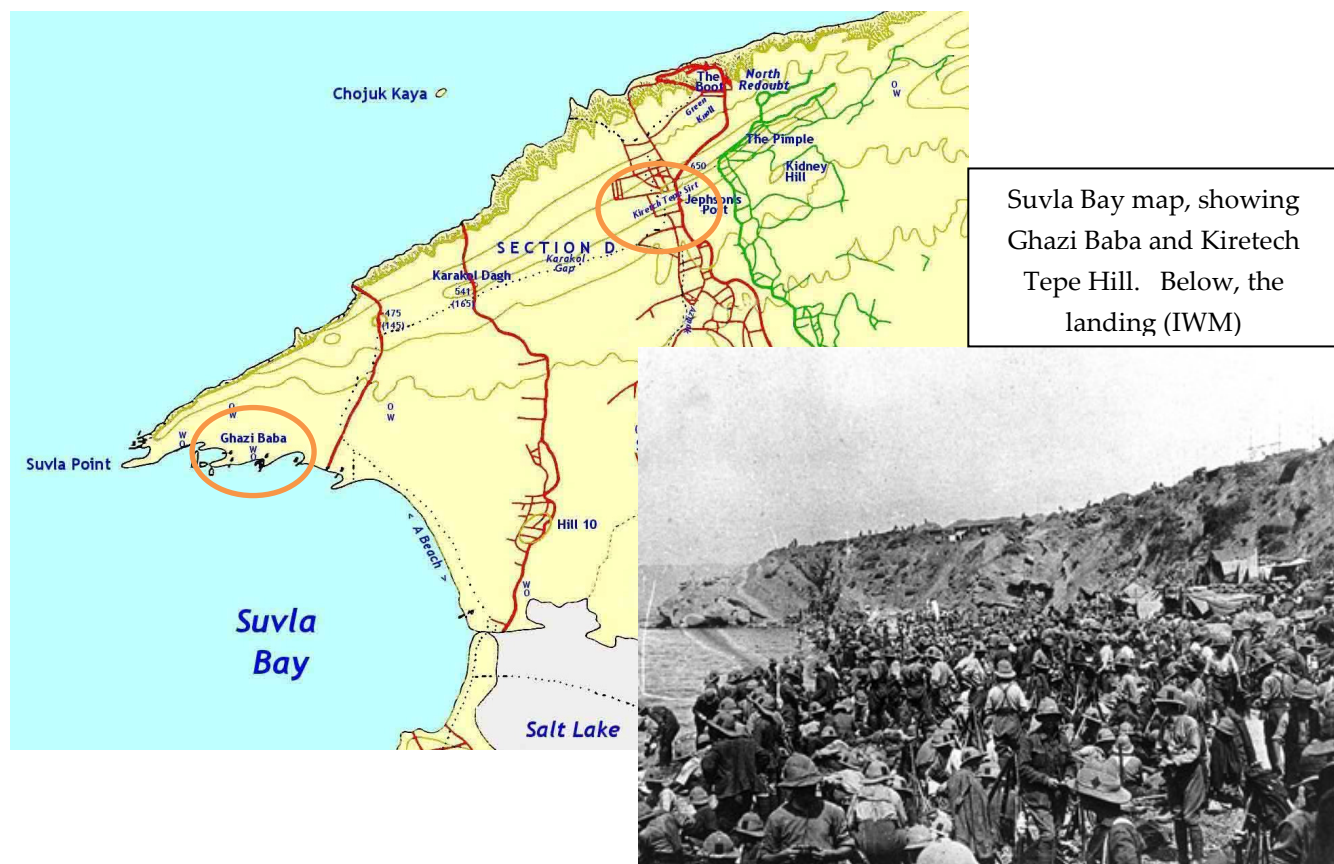


Narrow boat "Basingstoke" in 1913
 (Tony Harmsworth)

The Basingstoke Canal, which never thrived, was sold in 1904, followed by years of financial chicanery and mismanagement, so in 1909 the company was wound up, the same year that the Webb family moved back to Lock Cottage for the last and longest time. In the spring of 1911, the census shows the parents there with seven of their nine surviving children. Father Edward was working as a general labourer for the N.R.A. at Bisley Camp and Frederick had become a butcher's boy.

Come the War, information about Frederick Webb is scarce. We do not know when he enlisted, but the Medal Roll shows him as a Private in the 5th Battalion of the Royal Irish Regiment, who trained initially in Ireland and near Basingstoke before sailing for the Dardanelles on July 22nd 1915 with the 10th (Irish) Division. The 5th Royal Irish, although trained as infantry, were converted to Pioneers in June 1915, being instructed in engineering work, especially road making; also providing a guard for Divisional Headquarters. However, this role was soon to go by the board after the Division landed at Suvla Bay on August 7th. The story of Gallipoli is a sorry one. The initial objective, to seize the

thinly defended high ground before Turkish reinforcements arrived, was not achieved by a combination of stiff opposition, lack of water and mismanagement to the point of farce, so the Allied forces were forever after on the back foot, pinned down by an enemy who could observe all movement below them from the hills above.



The first task for the 5th Royal Irish was to establish a Divisional Headquarters at Ghazi Baba, which soon fell into abeyance when they were called on to fill gaps in the line, gradually being established inland (the red lines on the map). At Kiretech Tepe hill (*marked*), undefended when they arrived, the advance was brought to a halt and there was fierce fighting at close quarters with the reinforced Turks. At one point the Irish became so short of ammunition that one brave but foolhardy Connaught Ranger took to throwing back Turkish grenades until the fifth one exploded in his hand and killed him. Others were reduced to throwing rocks. In the two days between August 14th and 16th there were over 4000 British casualties for no territorial gains whatsoever. For the remainder of the month the battalion was employed on construction work, guard and sentry duty before the Division withdrew from Gallipoli in September and moved to Salonika.

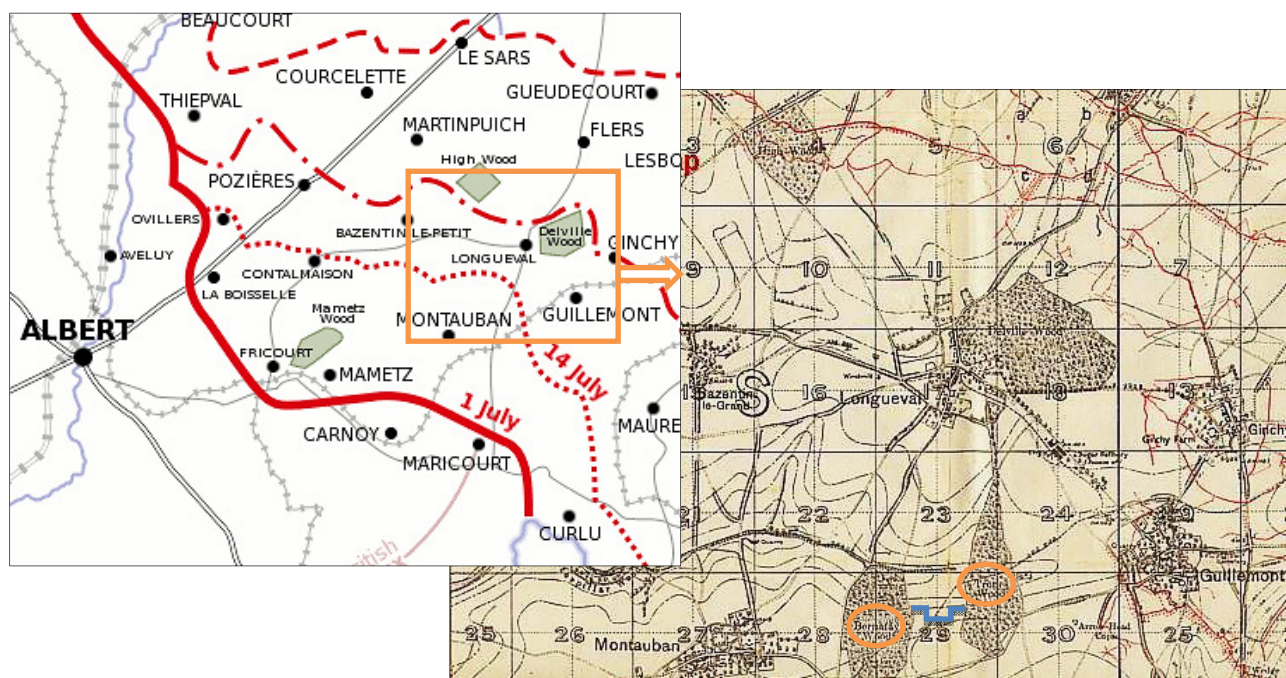
Like so much Allied activity in 1915, the decision to send troops to reinforce the Serbs was half-hearted and ill thought-out. As soon as they landed at Salonika, still in tropical uniform, the Greek Government, previously supportive, became neutral, so no help could be expected for the fighting on their northern frontier and by the time the 10th (Irish) Division reached the border, the Serbs had been routed by the Bulgarians. In December, advancing to Kosturino in modern-day Macedonia, together with the remnants of the Serbian army, short of equipment and firepower, the combined forces held off the opposing Bulgarians, suffering heavy casualties. The British withdrew to Salonika in some disorder, but the Bulgarians, for strategic reasons, decided not to follow them, so the 5th Royal Irish, with a reinforced Division, were employed during the rest of that winter and spring in back-breaking work, building a fortified defence for the city.



Left – Balkans map
Below – 5th Connaught Rangers at Kosturino (IWM)



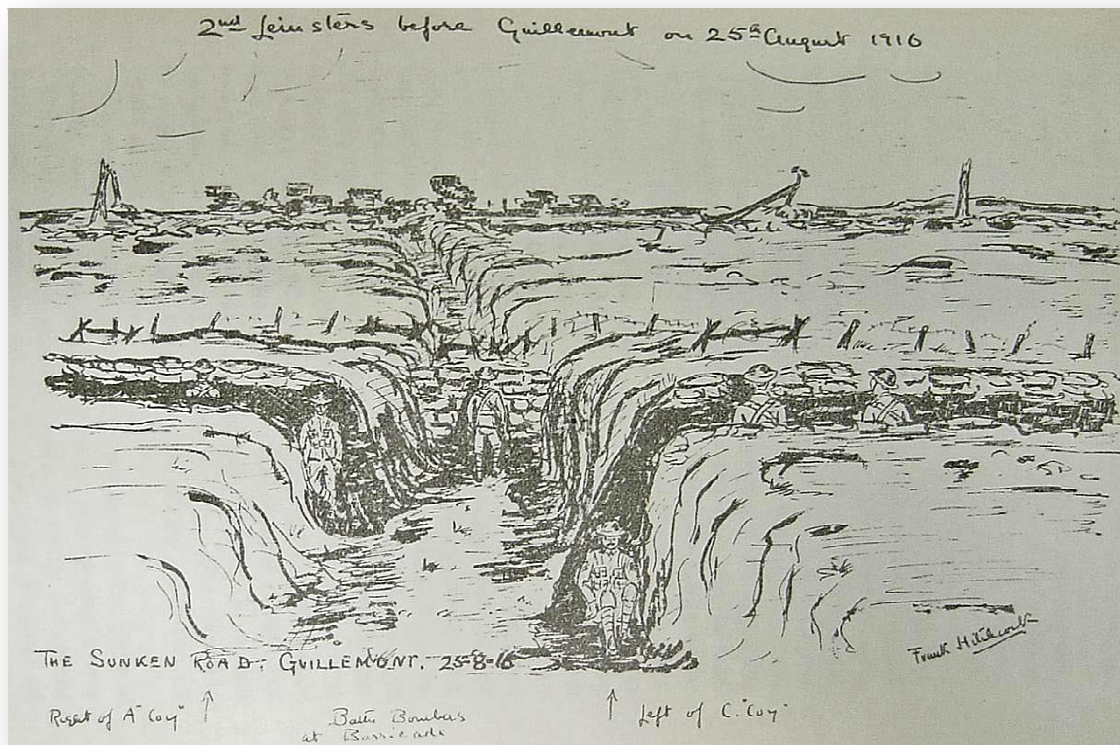
At some stage between late 1915 and mid-1916, Frederick Webb was posted to the 2nd Battalion, Prince of Wales’ Leinster Regiment (Royal Canadians), whose war was spent on the Western Front. The likeliest time would have been in spring 1915, after the Salonika defences had been built and before the ‘Big Push’ in July, although the 2nd Leinsters were still at Ypres on that fateful first day, not moving to the Somme until the end of the month.



Their first task was to dig nearly a mile of communication trench between Bernefay and Trones Woods (marked in blue), which became known as ‘Leinster Trench’. On August 18th, they were in support for an attack on Guillemont, with heavy casualties, then on the 23rd came front line duties on the sunken road between Trones Wood and Guillemont. This is a description of the spot from the diary of a German officer in the 73rd Hanoverian Fusiliers –

“The sunken road appeared only as a series of huge shell holes, filled with uniforms, equipment, arms and dead bodies. The surrounding ground as far as one could see was churned up by heavy shells..... The ground in front was strewn with British dead. Everywhere arms, legs and heads were sticking up.....partly covered by groundsheets to avoid the dreadful sight.”

The sketch overleaf, from the official history of the 2nd Leinsters, was drawn by 2nd Lt. Frank Hitchcock.



After the occasional patrol and very heavy shelling in this unpleasant spot, the battalion was relieved for two days rest before returning to the front, in pouring rain, between Delville Wood (*top of map*) and High Wood further north. Initially in support, they were ordered forward when the front line was overwhelmed. After fierce fighting, "B" Company was reduced to 35 men out of 220 by machine gun and shell fire and after the whole battalion had been relieved, they could only muster 9 officers and 270 men on parade on September 4th, out of a full complement of just over 1000.

The time had come for a rest, which came in billets near Amiens, where a draft of 150 joined, including patched-up wounded from the Royal Irish, which could have been another route for Frederick Webb to have joined the 2nd Leinsters. Another move came on September 20th, to Bruay, north of Vimy Ridge, in a mercifully quiet Loos sector.

The Battalion War Diary records "enemy's attitude extremely quiet....retaliation nil", and otherwise routine training, but on October 24th, 25th and 26th there was trench mortar activity. Frederick Webb may have been wounded by this, as he died of injuries on October 27th and is buried in Barlin Cemetery, not far behind the Leinsters position, which was in the front line. This cemetery took casualties from the 6th Casualty Clearing Station close by. Now Casualty Clearing Stations, as the name suggests, are temporary first-aid posts for the wounded before they died or were moved back to field hospitals as soon as possible, but the only previous mention of a soldier wounded in the War Diary was on October 9th, eighteen days before, so it would appear that the Diary cannot have recorded Frederick Webb's wounding.

The soldier's song below comes from 'The Great Push; An Episode of the War', by Patrick MacGill, a London Irish rifleman and was sung almost exactly one year before, at Noeux-les-Mines, close by. The background photo was taken in September 1916 at Souchez, also not far away.



AFTER LOOS

Café Pierre le Blanc, Noeux-les-Mines,
Michaelmas Eve (*September 28th*) 1915

Seven glasses used to be
Called for six good mates and me...
Now we only call for three.

Little crosses neat and white,
Looking lonely every night,
Tell of comrades killed in fight.

Hearty fellows they have been
And no more they will be seen
Drinking wine in Noeux les Mines.

Lithe and supple lads were they,
Marching merrily away....
Was it only yesterday?

Lusty comrades marched away?
Now they're covered up with clay.