

Personal Stories



from World War I



Herbert (Bert) King Wiltshire Regiment

Bert, as he was known, was the son of John King, who at the age of 17 in 1875, had to take responsibility for the running of Home Farm in Winterslow following the death of his older brother Herbert. He subsequently married Annie Green and had a family of 2 boys and 5 girls, the eldest boy being Herbert (Bert) who was baptised in All Saints church, Winterslow on 30th March 1891.

Being the eldest son Bert's future was mapped out, with the expectation he would take over from his father in running Home Farm. His route to this role was to be a privileged place at Bishop Wordsworth followed by a placement at Dauntsey's to study agriculture. Bert followed his father by joining the Village Cricket team, becoming its captain and following the family tradition of immersing himself in parish and church life.

Like a number of men from Winterslow, Bert felt duty bound to respond to the call for volunteers when World War One broke out in the summer of 1914, being posted to Weymouth for basic training. In October, having been granted weekend leave, he made his way to Winterslow making a surprise visit to his sister Mildred who was a boarder at the High School located on London Road in Salisbury and who Bert was to communicate by letter during his military service. Whilst at home he visited the Reading Room in St John's Schoolroom where the young men of the Parish met and he was a member. Bert explained that the Regiment were not able to supply his intake with uniforms, hence his arrival in "civies", but he was hopeful this would be resolved soon. Before returning to Weymouth, on the Monday, Sunday was spent at All Saints Church attending early service and two others taken by Rector Wheat.

In early December Bert wrote to Mildred keeping her up to date on his activities, which included training on the firing range and providing an image of a rain soaked soldier who had marched 5 miles in torrential rain. He said that relief came in watching silent movies at the cinema in Weymouth or by visiting the local theatre to watch plays. He also identified that it was likely he would not be able to return to Winterslow to spend Christmas with the family, but would look forward to receiving anything they might care to send to him.

January 1915 saw Private Herbert King disembark on the French coast and join his battalion the 1st Wilts in the now established front line only yards from the enemy. At this time in, early March, the British were planning their first major offensive near the village of Neuve Chappelle. Following a heavy bombardment of the enemy positions the 1st Wilts went into action on 10th March being involved for 4 days with the resulting 400 casualties and 170 dead, out of a total casualty list of some 13,000 for the British Army. Having been badly wounded in the spine on 12th March Bert was admitted to the field ambulance the following day, from which he was taken to the General Hospital in Rouen for treatment, which lasted a month and subsequently back to England on 24th April to convalesce.

Having spent time in Winterslow helping with the harvest Bert returned to duty and was posted to Egypt as part of reinforcements for the 5th Wiltshire, who had been withdrawn there having been involved in the failed action in Gallipoli. In February Bert found himself near the front lines facing the Turks in the Persian Gulf as part of the Mesopotamia Relief Force. The Anglo Expeditionary Force had landed in what is now Iraq in November 1914 to protect the oil fields from the Germans and their allies the Turks and access to the Persian Gulf. So, having advanced towards Bagdad the Turks counter attacked the British troops forcing them back to Kut, which is half way between Basra and Bagdad. Having been under constant attack for months in early 1916 a relief force, 13th Division including the 5th Wilts, was sent from Basra to reinforce the garrison. The British troops found themselves suffering from the extremes of temperature, flood and drought and ravages of malaria and cholera.

At the beginning of April the 5th Wilts relieved the 7th Division in the trenches at the front and spent two days improving defences. On 5th April the British troops advanced, encountering heavy rifle and machine gun fire, some two and a half miles to Falahiyejeh suffering 184 casualties, including Private H King.