

MY PATERNAL GRANDFATHER JAMES OLDFIELD



Private James Oldfield
Army Regimental Number 18328
20th Battalion of the Manchester Regiment 1914 - 1918

Family Background

James was the first born son of William Henry Oldfield and Elizabeth Warren, born on the 15th September 1889, at 17 Chapel Street in Pendlebury. His father William Henry was a coal miner who worked at the local Wheatsheaf Colliery. Two years after James' birth, the 1891 census shows him at home with his parent and a younger sister Agnes (1890). The family remained in Chapel Street until sometime after 1895, by which time William Henry and Elizabeth had two more sons - Thomas (1893) and John (1895). The 1901 census shows the family living at 45 Union Street. William Henry was still working at the colliery and shown as being a hewer - one of the hardest jobs to be had down the pit. In 1900, Elizabeth produced a daughter Harriet Ann, but Harriet Ann died shortly after birth. Then, in 1902, another son, Harry, was born and the 1911 census shows the whole family resident at 7 Union Street Pendlebury - James, Thomas and John all working down the pit with their father, and young Harry at home with his mother. Agnes, the only daughter, was working as a cotton spinner at the local mill. Also living with the family was a Thomas Belfield, shown as Elizabeth's father. Elizabeth and her 3 siblings had been orphaned in 1870/1, when both their parents died in their mid-twenties. Initially, Elizabeth's grandmother cared for them for a while, but eventually, when she was only 10 years old, Elizabeth had been put into service with the Belfield family. She was treated very much as an adopted child and, after himself being widowed, Mr Belfield was 'taken in' by Elizabeth and he remained with the Oldfield family until he died in 1917. Elizabeth was with him when he passed away at her family home.

James married my grandmother, Jane Ann Cousin, on 1st August 1914, at St Augustine's Church, Pendlebury. I believe this photo to have been taken either just before or just after they married, and before James enlisted.



At the start of their married life, they were living with James' family at 470, Bolton Road, Pendlebury.



Soon after James enlisted with the army, Jane found herself pregnant and facing life on her own as James went off to war, so she moved back to Salford, to be close to her mother and the rest of her family. Her son, James, my father, was born at 5 Irwell View, Salford, on 12th May 1915.

I know little of what grandfather's life was like as he was growing up, other than he followed his father down the pit until he enlisted to fight for King and Country in 1914. Returning home from the war in 1918, at some point not long after, my grandfather 'deserted' his wife and child, and headed over to Yorkshire where he remained for the rest of his life.

Family stories told to me by my father and grandmother lead me to think that grandfather must have left them around the early 1920s.

The first thing my father told me, which left a bad impression on him personally, was that my grandmother, on receipt of grandfather's military medal, threw it on the fire. I assume this medal would have been sent out sometime after the end of the war.

The second story, which reinforces my thoughts of when grandfather might have left, is the one when my father talked of a journey he made when he was very young - about 6 or 7 years old. Grandmother went to try to find her husband, possibly in an effort to then be able to claim some sort of maintenance from him. My father told me of them having absolutely no money for food or bus fares, so grandmother packed a case with their few belongings, and off they went on foot. At some stage, they were 'arrested' for vagrancy and put into a police cell overnight, which my father described as quite a luxury at the time. He said that he had been very exhausted and mentioned that they had even slept under the hedgerows some nights. That suitcase is still in the family!

I presume grandmother eventually located grandfather because for many years I remember her receiving a Maintenance postal order for 1/=-, which she used to allow me to collect for her. It had originally been 10/=-, but was reduced when my father reached a certain age, and the 1/=- remaining was her share of the maintenance. There was also mention of grandfather either having been sent to Strangeways Prison in Manchester or there having been a 'trial' where he was found guilty of 'desertion' and ordered to pay maintenance. After the war, there were many women left alone, and approaching the National Assistance Board for financial support was often their only choice. However, the NAB forced folk to 'prove' their cases, and, before receiving any help, all other means of finding funds had to be exhausted, even down to having to pawn or sell their clothes, as my grandmother told me she had done. On attending the NAB on one occasion, when grandmother asked for help, the NAB person told her to go and sell the good coat that she was wearing, and then come back when she had used the money.

My grandmother never forgave grandfather for leaving her destitute, so any mention of his name at home was totally banned. However, my father secretly encouraged me in my early years to write to grandfather, which I did. I know he received my letters and had been pleased to be in touch, because my father told me he answered them all. Unfortunately, my grandmother, who was then living with us, intercepted them and I never ever saw them myself, apart from one, which my father managed to 'save' for me. There was a photo enclosed of grandfather, taken outside the retirement home where he lived for 3 years - 1964-67 - until he died. It was a brief note, and it came from Fishlake in Yorkshire, but even that disappeared in time. I am pleased that I still have the photograph. Grandfather James is on the front row, 3rd from the left, leaning on his stick.



Don View, Thelluson Avenue, Scawsby - 1966

Don View is no longer a care home - in 2018, a letter of enquiry which I sent to them, was returned 'address no longer in existence.' I can only presume that Don View has gone the way of many council care homes - closed down because of funding cuts under the Tories Austerity Measures!



My grandmother knew exactly where grandfather was, and, on news of his death in 1967, (how did that come about?) went across to Yorkshire, to arrange the death certificates and his funeral. Grandfather died at the Western Hospital in Doncaster on 28th January, 1967. At the same time, she obtained a copy of the death certificate of the lady with whom grandfather had been living for at least 30 years, if not longer. That lady was called Jane Longmore. Sometime in the late 1940s, grandfather asked my grandmother for a divorce because he and Jane wanted to get married. My grandmother flatly refused to give James the chance to build a new life with a woman he had been with for many years. As my father said of his own mother, "She cut off her nose to spite her face". She herself had an ardent suitor for many years, a lovely man called Billy Dainty, known to me as "Uncle Billy". He had asked grandmother on several occasions to marry him, but of course she couldn't, because she was still married to grandfather. 'Uncle Billy' died, still single, in 1952.

When or where grandfather had met with Jane Longmore is a mystery to me. No one ever mentioned her until around the time of grandfather's death, but my own research has turned up some details of Jane and her life up to the time she met with grandfather. Jane was the daughter of Samuel Martin, a glass blower, and his wife Mary Jane Thompson - one of 10 children born to the couple - and the family lived in Knottingley, Pontefract. Jane married Richard Longmore in December 1926, at which time Jane was still at home with her parents, and Richard was living in Ferry Fryston. His family came from Spennymoor/Hartlepool area but had moved down to the Rotherham area at some time. In 1911, Richard's father was in prison in Rotherham, his mother was in lodgings in Rotherham - New Holland - with her eldest son James and her grandson Cyril, and Richard himself was in the Royal Albert Institution in Lancaster, shown as a patient. On his marriage certificate in 1926, Richard declared his father Isaac to be deceased but I have confirmed his father was still alive at the time, so maybe this had something to do with the prison record.

Jane and Richard had a son, Robert, born in October 1927, when the family was living in Aire Street in Knottingley. Robert died when he was just over 2 years old, and his place of death was shown on the certificate as 1 Paradise Gardens Pontefract - otherwise known as the Workhouse or Northgate Lodge. The person informing his death was his father Richard Longmore. The address given for the family was then 10 Ranter Row, Ferry bridge, Ferry Fryston, Pontefract. There was no mention of Jane on the death certificate, and both the child's birth and death were reported by his father Richard. Richard died in 1955, and is buried in the same grave as his mother in Ferrybridge Cemetery. I assume Jane was with her husband Richard Longmore until at least 1927, and therefore must have met my grandfather sometime after 1927, but before 1939.

The first confirmed detail I have for grandfather and Jane Longmore being together is the 1939 Register, when they were resident at 39 Horsefair, Pontefract.



Horsefair, Pontefract

Grandfather James is described as a full-time ARP worker, doing heavy work with the First Aid Reserve Squad and Jane as his partner, doing 'unpaid domestic duties'. By checking the electoral rolls, I was then able to establish that James and Jane had moved to Church Street in Fishlake sometime around the late 1940s. They remained together in Fishlake until Jane's death in 1963. During their time in Fishlake, apparently grandfather James worked for the Pilkington's Glass Factory in Kirk Sandall. One of the members of the Fishlake History Society has told me that he had spoken to an elderly retired Pilkington's employee, who said it was highly likely James worked on the glass furnaces, because he was known for walking to work in his clogs! Only the men who worked on the furnaces wore them. I am waiting for further details of his employment record from the Pilkington Trust, whom I have recently contacted.

Below is an old photograph showing Church Street and the cottages where James and Jane lived, opposite the Hare and Hounds Inn. I was fortunate to discover the Fishlake History Society, and they have been extremely helpful in confirming for me the whereabouts of James and Jane in far more detail than I had myself. This is a photograph taken from their website, where they are maintaining a detailed record of the changes that have occurred in Fishlake over the years - details that might have been otherwise lost forever.



Looking at the photograph above, according to several villagers who are still alive today, James and Jane are remembered as living firstly at a house just beyond the top end of the terrace on the left as you look at the photograph.

Below is a frontal photograph of those same cottages on Church Street, where grandfather lived between 1949 and 1958. The houses were in a state of disrepair when the photograph was taken, maybe sometime 1970-1980? They were living in the house on the far right end of the terrace, and the one they occupied previously would have been next door, where there is now an open space, used as parking. The terrace was renovated and is now known as Elizabeth Cottages.



Below is a photograph of those same cottages on Church Street today on the left-hand side of the photo...with the Customs House on the right-hand side.

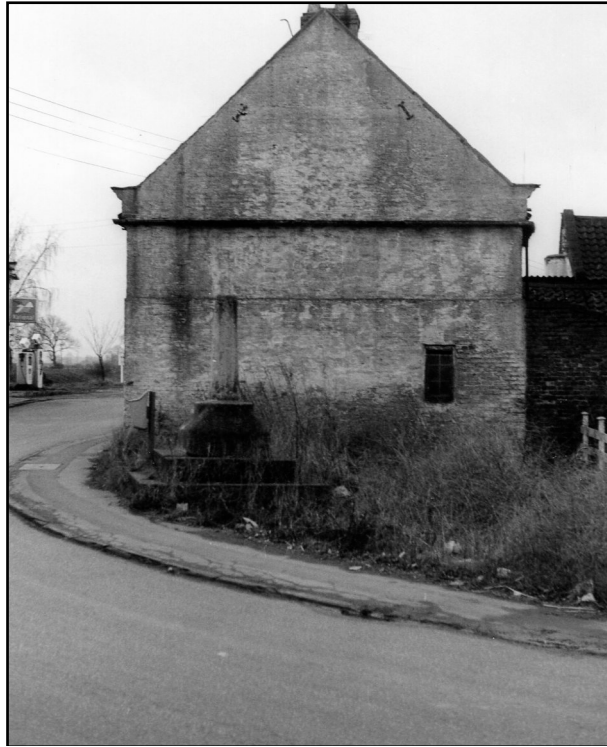


I recently discovered (28th March 2018) that the very house grandfather lived in at the end of the 'terrace' is now up for sale with Right move, at a selling price of £240k. It's no longer a 2-up -2-down but a 4-bed. semi-detached! I assume 2 of the terraced houses were 'knocked into one'.

From 1959 until 1963, James and Jane were living at 3 Downings Cottages, Downings Yard off Main Street in Fishlake, until Jane died there on 24th December 1963. That must have been a sad Christmas for grandfather, because Jane was buried on Boxing Day, at St Cuthbert's Church. In the New Year following Jane's death, grandfather moved in to the Don View Nursing Home, where he remained until he died in 1967. It was sad to realise that, after his death, he was cremated, organised by my grandmother and conducted by the Co-operative Society, but no family members attended his funeral, and his ashes were simply scattered at the Rosehill Crematorium. There is no commemoration plaque for him.

Below are photographs showing the Butter Cross, and the access to Downings Yard, which was next to the White House. The houses have since been demolished.





Downings Yard after the houses were demolished

Army Service Record for James Oldfield

20th Battalion Manchester Regiment Army Service Number 18328



1914

My grandfather James enlisted with the 20th Battalion of the Manchester Regiment in November 1914, just 2 months after he married. At the time of his enlistment, he was working as a collier at the Wheatsheaf Pit in Pendlebury. Unfortunately, his service record was one of those thousands lost during the blitz of WW2, now classed as "burnt records", but I have managed to find some documents which have helped me to piece together a service record 'of sorts'. Sadly, details of his personal character, next-of-kin, demobilisation dates, pension details and such, which would have been contained in his actual record, are missing. It would have been useful to know exactly what his address had been at the time of demobilisation. However, I have his Medal Roll Card, his citation for his Military Medal, extracts from the London Gazette in December 1917, his Medal Card for his Military Medal, his Will which was drawn up before he went abroad, and are several photographs which were taken around the time of his enlistment. He was awarded the Military Medal for his actions on the field in October 1917

An invaluable source of information are the War Diaries for the Manchester Regiment, but they are time-consuming and heart-rending to read. I have tried to track the various battles that James was involved in, as well as gain an insight into conditions endured in the trenches and trace his movements throughout the war.

The 20th (Reserve) Battalion (5th City) and 21st (Reserve) Battalion (6th City) were formed on 08.11.1914 by the City and Lord Mayor of Manchester. When the first call for enlistment had gone out, the response had been overwhelming. On formation, the First Brigade started off at Heaton Park where the 'Manchester Pals' became deeply involved in building their own hutments. Because of the great response to "the call to duty", it became clear that other locations would be required to conduct the basic training of the 2nd Brigade. Grandfather's Battalion was sent to Morecambe and he sent this photograph to my grandmother, showing the family he had been billeted with.



1915

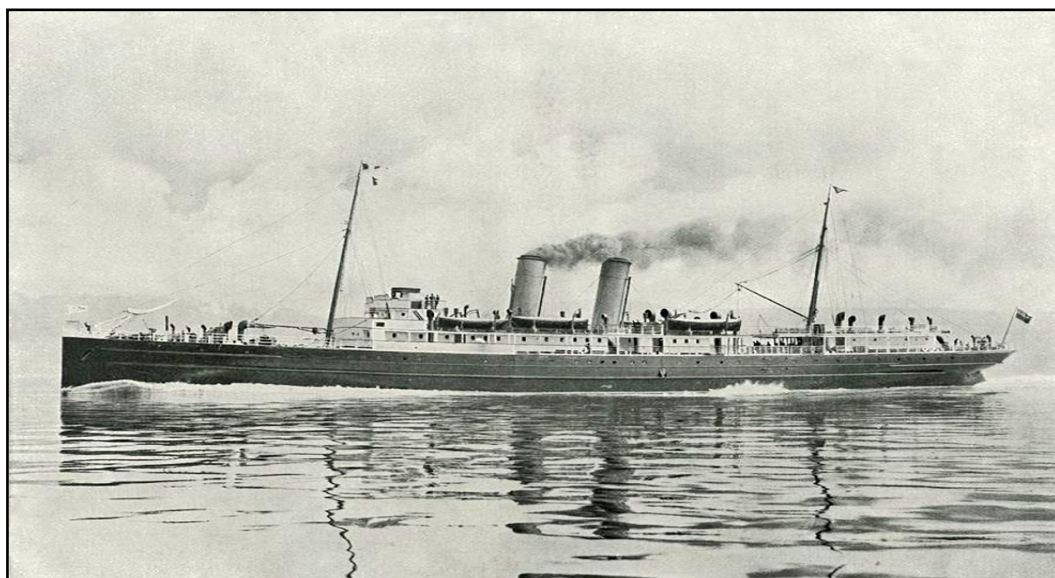
The Battalion then moved on to Belton Park in Grantham in April 1915, where they joined the 91st Brigade of the 30th Division. On the 10.08.1915, it was taken over by the War Office and moved to Larkhill, Wiltshire in Sept 1915. It became part of the 22nd Brigade of the 7th Division.



The photograph below was taken during 1915, when my father was about 3 months old, so likely to date from around August/September 1915, probably taken just before my grandfather left to go to France. It was the usual thing to do for the young men going off to war - having family group photographs taken which would then be carried with them.



On enlistment, James was in "E" company but, on moving to Larkhill, after much reorganisation of manpower he was transferred to "A" company. Having been mobilised for War, the Battalion left Larkhill on 9th November 1915, and entrained at 5.20am for Folkestone. They arrived in Folkestone at 12.15pm and, at 1pm, started to embark aboard "SS Princess Victoria". She had been built in 1912 by Denny of Glasgow for the Larne-Stranraer Steamboat Company, part of the Port Patrick and Wigtownshire Rly., running the Stranraer-Larne crossing, and she served as troopship during 1914 - 1919 but was scrapped in 1934. At the time, the war diary records the crossing as "wet and stormy".



SS "Princess Victoria"

ARRIVAL IN FRANCE 1915.

The Battalion arrived in Boulogne at 4.10pm that day, 9th November 1915, and after disembarking, immediately set off for a rest camp at Ostro-Houe, which they reached at 6pm. They left Boulogne the following day, having entrained for Pont Remy, then route-marched through Bouchon, Mouflers, heading for Vaux-en-Amiens. On 18th November, the Battalion then headed for Molliens au Bois where they remained until the 26th November. During this time, they were constantly undergoing basic training 'on the march'.

Arriving in Couin at the end of November, they were attached to the 145th Brigade for further training - for "A" Company an attachment to the 4th Royal Berkshire Regiment was in place between 28th November to the 3rd December. They 'worked' alongside fully-trained soldiers until, on the 3rd December 1915, at 3pm, they were sent to the front line trenches, where they would start to operate as individual companies.

On the 6th December, 1915, the Battalion reached Boisbergues, where the men settled into billets and remained there until 19th December when they set off for Molliens Vidame. They remained in Molliens Vidame until end of January 1916, when they moved on to Morlancourt, having passed through St Vast-en-Chaussee, heading for the front line.

1916

It was at the beginning of February 1916 that the Battalion proceeded to the Reserve Dugout on the Fricourt-Bray Road. Then, after 6 days in action, when they were relieved by the 1st Battalion of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, they returned to their rest billets at Morlancourt, and remained there for 4 days. They then returned to the front line trenches on February 14th, to relieve the 2nd Royal Warwickshire Battalion. The War Diary describes the situation at the time - "heavy shelling with shrapnel and whizzbangs, and machine gun fire". After 9 days of heavy, concentrated warfare, the Battalion again returned to their rest billets in Morlancourt, but after 3 days, were back in the front line, where they remained until 4th March. They were relieved by the 24th Manchester Regiment on that occasion.

During the Spring and early summer, whilst still under attack, the men were also engaged in constant revetting of boundaries, constructing new trenches, all of which attracted interest from the enemy and resulted in continuing artillery fire. It was all in preparation for the forthcoming Battle of the Somme. The fighting went on around Fricourt and Morlancourt well into June.

On the 1st July 1916, the First Day of the Battle of the Somme, the 20th Battalion engaged in the Battle of Albert. During the period of Battle - 1st to 5th July 1916 - the casualty list which I took from the War Diary was as follows:-

Officers - 10 Killed and 6 Wounded

ORs - 110 Killed , 171 Wounded and 29 Missing in Action

82 ORs drafted in from base.

On the 9th July 1916, a further draft arrived of 382 ORs, followed on the 10th July by a further draft of 67 men. This was when grandfather's brother in law, James Coussons, joined the same Battalion from the 2nd Manchester Regiment. (See further detail in July 1917)

By the 14th July, they were engaged in the Battle for Bazentin. This went on for several days, followed by the Battle for Delville Wood, which lasted until September when the action then turned to Guillemont. On the 3rd September, at the attack on Ginchy village on which the Germans had a tight grip, more heavy casualties were recorded.

Although the Battalion was relieved at varying times, sometimes that 'relief' would only be to fall back from the front line to the support trench behind the front line, still under fire. As men were drafted in to replace those who had lost their lives, constant reorganisation was taking place. The War Diary records the terrible losses that were being experienced and, on the 26th/27th of August, at Ginchy, note is made of the 'heavy enemy bombardment so bad that our trenches were almost unrecognisable.' **During the 3 days between the 26th and 29th August, another 25 men died, along with over a 100 wounded and 21 missing but presumed dead.**

It was on the 17th September 1916 that the 20th Battalion received orders to move north, to the YPRES district. On the 18th September, the Battalion relieved the 7th Battalion of the Kings Own Regiment at Ploegsteert Wood, and they remained in the front line trenches until relieved on the 29th September by the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. They were sent back to Reserve Billets, not to rest but to undergo constant training and absorb more reinforcements.

During November, they continued rigorous training - practice attacks, route marching between various points but also road repair work occupied a lot of their time. Heavy enemy shelling had destroyed much of the road network. On the 29th November, they returned to front line duty and were heavily involved in the defence of Beaumont Hamel. They were in the trenches at Beaucourt from the 18th December through the Christmas period until relieved on the 26th December by the 2nd Gordon Highlanders, when they took over their billets at Louvencourt.

1917

During 1917, the Germans began to retreat to the Hindenburg Line, the Arras offensive was imminent and major battles such as the Battles of Polygon Wood, Broodseinde, Poelcapelle, and the Second Battle of Passchendaele were all to be experienced..

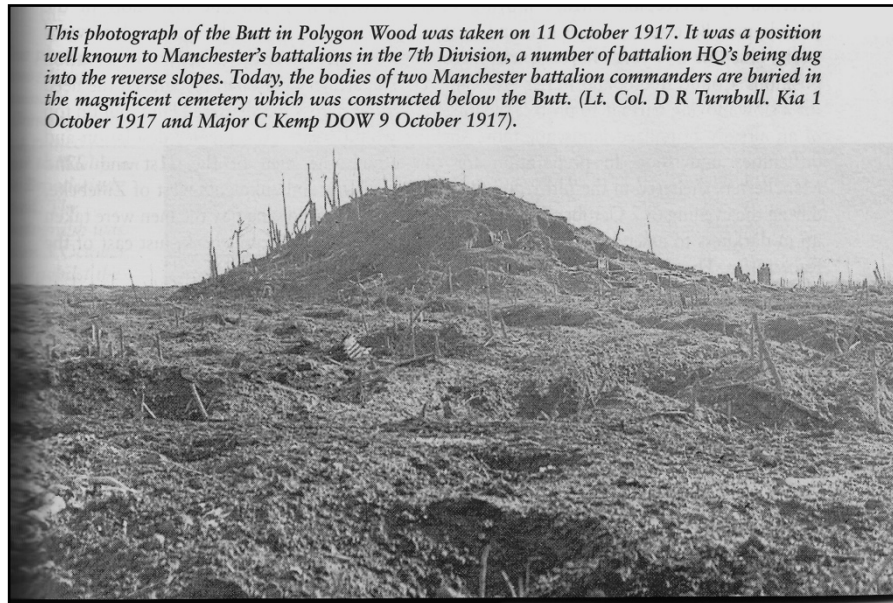
January 1917 saw the Battalion in 'No Mans Land', billeted at Mailly- Maillet , with a major attack planned for the 11th January. During February, the Battalion was on duty at the Prisoner of War Camp at Acheux, and throughout March, they were 'on relief' but undergoing continuous training. April saw them back to the front at Ecoust-St-Mein and during May, there were attacks ongoing at Bullecourt which continued throughout June. In July, there was much work being done on deepening, widening and duck-boarding trenches which had already been severely damaged by constant heavy shelling.

August saw them undergoing even more training - musketry, attack drill, rifle range practice, trench attack, wiring, and, at the beginning of September, they moved to the Wallon Cappel area. On the 13th September, they had moved to Wardrecque and by the end of the month, were in a new camp at Dickebusch. On the 30th September 1916, they left the camp to relieve the 55th Battalion Australian Infantry. They left camp at 3.25pm, heading for the Hooze Crater, with instructions not to pass the Crater until a certain time. All the men going to the trenches had been given 2 days' rations.



Dug outs at the Hooze Crater - 1917

It was at the start of October 1917 that more heavy fighting occurred during the Battle of Polygon Wood and the occupation of Ritz Trench. It was during this battle that my Great Uncle Jim, who had transferred to Battalion in July 1916, serving alongside my grandfather, was killed - blown to bits and totally lost without any trace. It was also at this point that grandfather, in his capacity as a stretcher bearer, was involved in an attempt to recover a number of injured soldiers from the area known as 'no-man's land' whilst under heavy fire, and for which he was later awarded the Military Medal. It has crossed my mind many times how it was such a coincidence that one relative should receive an award for bravery at the same time and place as another lost his life.



The photograph below shows the horrendous conditions that the stretcher bearers and recovery parties had to contend with at that battle. At times, stretcher bearers would carry their wounded on their backs because it was impossible to handle stretchers in the depth of mud and cratered ground beneath their feet.



The War Diary shows the Casualty Report for the Month of October was as follows:-
Ordinary Ranks:- 55 Killed, 180 Wounded, 30 Missing presumed dead
Officers:- 3 Killed, 1 Died of Wounds, 5 Wounded
 It also includes the Commendation for Award of the Military Medal for my grandfather.

At the end of October, the Battalion marched to Ouderdom Station and there entrained for Ebbingham, arriving at 2am on 31st October 1917.

THE MOVE TO ITALY - November 1917

Once established in new billets, the Battalion underwent considerable reorganisation, and, on the 12th November, at the billets at Aubin-St-Vaast, the whole Brigade was reviewed by the King of Belgium. One week later, the 20th Manchesters marched to Hesdin, to entrain for the journey across to Italy. There they would be involved in helping strengthen the Italian resistance to the Austro-Hungarian Army. There is little included in the War Diary about this period of their service, although there is some detail of their journey and the response of the men to finding themselves in a beautiful country.

They went through the Mt Cenis Tunnel, Turin and Pavia, detraining at Legnago, and James's "A" Company went into billets at Angiari for a day, before marching on to Campiglia. The billets were described as 'not so good' and the village was said to be 'full of deserters' according to the local inhabitants.

On the 27th November, the Battalion moved to Barbarano, a small village at the foot of the mountains. The beautiful mountain views are mentioned in the War Diary. After the horrors of Arras and Passchendael it must have been such a contrast. They then marched on to Villafranca via Grisignano and Campodoro. On the 30th November, James and "A" Company were in billets at Camposampiero.

The 20th Battalion of the Manchester Regiment remained in Italy until September 1918, when they returned to France, transferred to the 7th Brigade of the 25th Division and again found themselves fighting on the Western Front. They were engaged in battles at Beaurevoir, Cambrai, the Pursuit to and Battle of the Selle and the Battle of Sambre. On the 11th November 1918, as the war ended, the Battalion was in the Landrecies area.

My father told me that my grandfather had been a stretcher bearer during the war, and it was my father who also told me of the actions undertaken by my grandfather which resulted in his being awarded the Military Medal. No details of that actual 'incident' are mentioned in either the War Diary or the in the London Gazette. I have tried to discover by way of the War Diary what the stretcher bearers did, under whose authority they would be operating and if they were full-time or whether soldiers were simply 'allocated' the duty as and when required, but I could find nothing at all specific.

However, I did manage to discover there were two types of Stretcher Bearers (SBs) in the Great War; Regimental SBs and those in the Royal Army Medical Corps, which I know grandfather was NOT. The ones at regimental level were in infantry battalions; traditionally in peace time these men were part of the battalion band and were musicians as well as SBs, but following the formation of Kitchener's Army in 1914 that gradually began to change and men were selected for the aptitude rather than their ability to play an instrument, with the medical training coming second. Regimental SBs were the first port of call for battlefield wounded; they would search the battlefield for casualties and take them to the Regimental Aid Post for treatment by the RMO – the Regimental Medical Officer – usually a Lieutenant or Captain from the RAMC. From here they would be taken to a collection point where SBs from the RAMC would take over and transport them back to the nearest Advanced Dressing Station (ADS) or Main Dressing Station (MDS).

I am sure that based on the reports of the War and the numbers of casualties being recorded, the requirement for Stretcher Bearers would have been a constant one, and therefore a full-time post.

I have only produced a short account of my grandfather's service but, having spent a lot of time reading through the War Diaries, I feel as if I have not done justice really to the terrible conditions that had to be endured by all those at war. The War Diaries are well worth looking through - they contain so much more detail - what the weather was like, what sort of artillery attacks were happening, descriptions of the state of the trenches, and the attempts to maintain communications. There are copies of Secret Orders issued before a battle was due to commence, along with instructions to company commanders as to timings of marches and destinations to aim for. They are even more moving because they were written by men who were there, in the midst of the "terrible hell" that was World War 1.

Having no Service Record available, just what happened to James as the war ended is an unknown. Nor have I been able to work out why or when he decided to move to Yorkshire. I shall continue this research. There is a very tenuous link with Yorkshire for James at the end of the war. His other brother-in-law, George Cousin, who survived the war, having served on the Western Front and then in Salonika, after demobilisation moved to Rotherham. George had served with the 13th Battalion of the Manchester Regiment but was sent back to England as a Malaria Case in 1917, and, on recovery, transferred to the 3rd Reserve Battalion of the Manchesters, stationed at Cleethorpes. It was there that George met his wife-to-be, and they ended up in Rotherham. As I say, more research to be done.....

Sources used:-

Fishlake History Society - Mr Peter Trimmingham
Census Records
WAR DIARIES OF THE MANCHESTER REGIMENT 1914 - 1918
Tameside Archive for the Manchester Regiment
'Manchester Pals' by Michael Stedman
'History of the Manchester Regiment' by Col. H C Wylly
'Passchendaele - the story of the 3rd Battle of Ypres' by Lyn Macdonald
"Somme" by Lyn Macdonald
"The Great War" by Peter Hart
"First Day on the Somme" by Martin Middlebrook

The books are all contained in my Family History Collection as are the War Diaries

Websites:-

Imperial War Museum
Manchester Regiment
Findmypast
Forces War Records