

Trading Stories, Working Lives

Graham Barker commemorates the service and sacrifice of five Barker brothers and in-laws during the Great War

On the morning of Tuesday 19 October 1915 there's a brisk rat-tat-tat on the door-knocker at Firwood, Knighton Park Road. Mabel Kevan the housemaid wipes her damp hands on her apron as she steps swiftly through the panelled hallway. The telegram delivery boy peers down to double-check he has the correct address: "Telegram for Mr and Mrs John W Barker" he announces, barely lifting his eyes.

By now, Sarah Barker has appeared. "Thank you, Mabel, that'll be all," she says, taking the telegram to open in the privacy of the morning room. Over recent days she has had a sense of foreboding. Indeed, a sombre mood has settled over the entire town as dreadful news has begun to emerge from the Western Front. The 1st/4th Leicesters have suffered enormous losses at the Hohenzollern Redoubt, near Loos in northern France. Her fears are confirmed; the War Office advise that her eldest son, John Edward 'Ted' Barker is "missing and believed wounded".

LIEUT. E. BARKER.
Lieut. J. E. Barker is 33 years of age, and is the eldest son of Mr. John W. Barker, of "Firwood," Knighton Park-road. He was educated at the Wyggeston School and Bourne College, Quinton. On the declaration of war in August, 1914, he joined the 1st/4th Leicesters, and, thanks to his previous army experience, soon rose to the rank of Company Sergeant-Major. Subsequently he was given a commission as Second-Lieutenant in his own Battalion. An official telegram, received by the family on Tuesday, stated that Lieutenant Barker was missing and believed wounded.



Sarah has trouble taking in the news. There's hope yet, she believes; Ted might still be alive, injured on the battlefield. After composing herself, she nips next door to Ringstead – the home to her eldest daughter Nellie. Her thoughts are racing. Nellie's husband, Arthur Billson, is a Captain in the 4th Leicestershire Regiment. God help us if a telegram about Arthur has arrived too. Thankfully, the telegram boy has gone on his way without calling next door.

Over the ensuing days, the newspapers are packed with column upon column of local men listed as wounded, missing, or killed in action. The Leicester Daily Post (20 Oct 1915) reports: "It is with profound regret that we have to confirm the rumours that have been so persistently in circulation the last few days, that the 1st/4th Leicesters have suffered severe losses. The battalion

was in action on October 13, and how they suffered may be judged from the list of officers whose deaths have been officially notified to their relatives.” By the Saturday edition, there’s a biography and photograph of Ted Barker staring out from the front page. No further news of him comes through and the glimmer of hope fades. He is one of 20 officers and 453 other ranks in the 1st/4th Battalion to have perished at the Hohenzollern Redoubt.

Ted Barker and his brother-in-law Arthur Billson had been among the first Leicester men to sign up. Both of them had previous military experience. Ted had served for three years in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. He’d hoped to join the Boer War effort but instead saw service in India. His medical card describes a slender but keen 18-year old: fresh complexioned, blue eyed, brown haired, not quite 5’8” tall and weighing 131 lbs. During his service he’d been promoted to Corporal, but in 1903 he opted instead to return to the family firm in Leicester: John W Barker & Sons, painters and decorators of Belvoir Street.

Arthur Billson, on the other hand, had worked his way up through the 1st Volunteer Battalion of the Leicestershire Regiment. By 1908 he’d been appointed Captain, before resigning the commission to marry Nellie Barker, start a family, and concentrate on running the Billson glove and hosiery business.

Within a week of war being declared on 4 August 1914, Ted Barker heads to his solicitor’s office to make a will. It’s clear from the outset that the war could be long and dangerous; he’s keen to ensure that his wife Norah and baby daughter Nancie are provided for, should the worst happen.



And so it is, on 2 March 1915, that Ted and Arthur march along Oxford Street heading for the Great Central station. A photographer captures the moment; that could almost be Arthur at the front, leading his unit. Crowds wave them off, and a military band plays as their train pulls out of the station. Also marching with them is Walter Rowland Shimeld – like them, an Old

Wyggestonian – who has recently started courting Connie Barker, Ted’s younger sister. After landing at Le Havre, they enter their first ‘theatre of war’ – a phrase that understates the true horrors ahead – at Hooze, near Ypres, where the Germans used flammenwerfer to fire burning liquid into the British trenches.

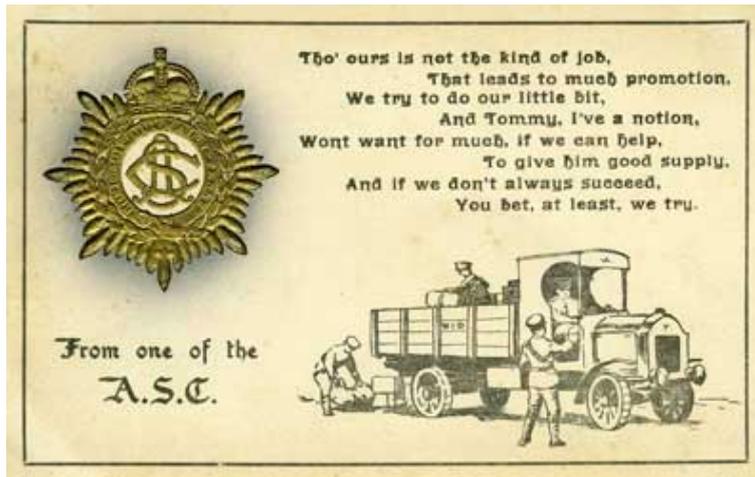
But it was the assault some three months later upon Hohenzollern Redoubt that was to define, and devastate, the regiment. Matthew Richardson in ‘Leicester in the Great War’ takes up the story: “One of the hardest German positions to capture had been the formidable Hohenzollern Redoubt, a strongpoint bristling with machine guns, set amid the German lines immediately in front of Corons de Maroc. On 13 October 1915, the 1st/4th Leicesters were allotted the task of capturing it. The preliminary bombardment was weak and German machine gunners were well prepared – as always. Despite the bravery of the men involved, the attack was a disaster... It was probably the hardest single blow which hit the town in four years of war.”

A letter home from one soldier, published in the Leicester Daily Mercury (3 Nov 1915), describes the scene: “A small ration of rum was handed round, and then a message “The CO wishes God-speed and good luck to all his men.” Officers stood, watch in hand, counting the crawling seconds. “Five minutes to two, Four! Three! Two! One!” – then, “Over you go with the best of luck.” Brave lads, up they climbed at intervals of a yard apart... A few seconds and the next line followed... The spit and phut of the rifles and of machine gun bullets was incessant, incredible but the boys never wavered. Men fell and lay where they fell, but the long thin line went forward, determined and strong.”

Remarkably, Arthur Billson and Walter Shimeld survived. But Ted Barker – by now a Second Lieutenant, with responsibility for a platoon of up to 30 soldiers – perished in the onslaught. He left behind a gaping hole in the family. “Ted was destined to take over the [Barker family] firm and was very capable and full of drive,” writes a colleague.

In the shadow of this loss and carnage, Ted’s two younger brothers sign up for service. Roland George Barker enlists in December 1915 as a motor driver for the (Royal) Army Service Corps. And Sidney Eric Richards Barker – who had emigrated ‘down under’ – had already joined the Australian Light Horse.

As Chris Baker at The Long, Long Trail explains, “The officers and men of the Army Service Corps... were the unsung heroes of the British Army in the Great War. Soldiers cannot fight without food, equipment and ammunition. They cannot move without horses or vehicles. It was the ASC’s job to provide them... Using horsed and motor vehicles, railways and waterways, the ASC performed prodigious feats of logistics and were one of the great strengths of organisation by which the war was won.”



Roland heads overseas to Italy (April 1917), East Africa (Sept 1917 to Feb 1918) and South Africa (July 1918 to April 1919). En route, he contracts malaria. His 1917 kit list includes the basic provisions – such as two shirts, two pairs of drawers, three pairs of worsted socks, cutlery, a shaving brush and hand towel – and also a so-called ‘housewife’: a small cotton pouch containing darning wool, thread, needles, and spare buttons to repair his uniform when needed.

Articles of Clothing & Necessaries in Possession.

Articles not in possession should be struck out of the list. Any articles not included should be inserted.

Clothing.	No.	Necessaries.	No.
Aprons, kilt	-	Badge, cap	1
Boots, ankle, pairs	1	Bag, Kit	1
Caps, Service Dress	1	Braces, pairs	1
Caps, Glengarry	2	Brass, Button	1
Drawers, pairs	2	Brush, Brass	-
Frocks, Canvas	1	Blacking	-
Greatcoat, D.M.	1	Clothes	-
Jackets, Service Dress	1	Hair	-
Kilts	-	Polishing	-
Pantaloons, cord, pairs	-	Shaving	1
Putties, pairs	1	Tooth	1
Spurs, Jack, pairs	-	Cap, Comforter	1
Trousers, Service Dress, pairs	1	Comb, hair	1
Trousers, Canvas or Khaki Drill Overalls, pairs	-	Disc, identity, with cord	2
Waistcoat, cardigan	1	Fork	1
Coat, waterproof	-	Gaiters, Highland, pairs	-
Gloves, leather, pairs	1	Holdall	1
Gloves, Motor Cyclist, pairs	-	Hose Tops, pairs	-
Goggles, pairs	1	Housewife	1
<i>Best Doolen</i>	1	Knife, Clasp	1
<i>Body Band</i>	1	Knife, Table	1
Clothed to G/Seas	1	Laces, leather, spare, pairs	-
Table 5, Deficiencies	1	Shirts, flannel	2
(if any) as per A.P. 64	1	Socks, worsted, pairs	3
and A.F.W. 43066	1	Spoon	1
		Titles, metal, pairs	1
		Towels, hand	1
		Wax Polish, tin	-
			1

I certify that this statement is correct.

Date - 4 APR 1917

Signature of the Soldier *Roland Barker*

Whilst Roland was serving in Africa, his youngest brother Sid “had a brief moment of glory in that he joined the Australian Light Horse, a famous fighting regiment that harried the Hun in Palestine during the Allenby campaign,” recalled his nephew Geoffrey in the 1980s. Well, such swashbuckling service might have been the perception from Leicester, but the truth was rather less glamorous. As Sidney’s daughter Betty writes, “My father did indeed enlist in the Australian Light Horse and was initially housed at the Flemington Show grounds. As a result of the conditions there, he, and a number of other recruits contracted bovine tuberculosis. His battle was not a ‘glorious’ one but a life-long one with the disease.”

Sid’s service records have so far proved elusive. What is clear is that the Australian Light Horse played a pivotal role in the Middle East. “The charge of the 4th Australian Light Horse at Beersheba late in the afternoon of 31 October 1917, is remembered as the last great cavalry charge,” according to the Australian War Memorial website. “The Light Horse moved off at the trot, and almost at once quickened to a gallop. As they came over the top of the ridge and looked down the long, gentle open slope to Beersheba, they were seen by the Turkish gunners, who opened fire with shrapnel. But the pace was too fast for the gunners. After three kilometres... some men dismounted and then attacked the Turks with rifle and bayonet from the rear. Some galloped ahead to seize the rear trenches, while other squadrons galloped straight into Beersheba.” Gaza fell a week later and on 9 December 1917 the British troops entered Jerusalem.

Back in Leicester, John and Sarah Barker do their best to hold the family together. By now, they have two sons and two sons-in-law on active service. It’s impossible not to worry. News filters through sporadically. Arthur Billson has been promoted to Major in the Leicestershire Regiment (June 1917). Roland Barker – an accomplished artist – amuses his three children, I like to think, with sketches of African animals in his letters home. Walter Shimeld – after marrying his sweetheart Connie Barker whilst on leave in 1916 – is commissioned as Second Lieutenant in the Duke of Cambridge’s Own (Middlesex) Regiment. And Sidney Barker, despite his poor health, is fighting in the Middle East.

As the Great War draws to a close, families throughout the land struggle to understand whether the price of victory – a generation of young men wiped out – has been worth it. What’s crystal clear is that the dead should be honoured. Over the next decade, Ted Barker, along with thousands of other war dead, is commemorated repeatedly. A large bronze Memorial Plaque featuring Britannia and a lion – dubbed the ‘Dead Man’s Penny’ – is presented to his widow, Norah. His name is read out at the Old Wyggestonian memorial service at St Martin’s Church (Dec 1919) and inscribed into a memorial erected in the school grounds (July 1922).

At Freemasons’ Hall on London Road, Ted’s name is painted in gilt lettering atop an elegant memorial (Oct 1921). He’s listed on the temporary war memorial erected in Town Hall Square – until the colossal Arch of

Rememberance, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, rises in Victoria Park (1925) – and further afield on the Loos Memorial (Aug 1930). Yet perhaps most importantly, Ted's legacy lived on in his daughter, Nancie – not quite three years old when her father died – who went on to have her own family, which now flourishes in Wimbledon and New South Wales.



Alas, as we know, the Great War was not “the War to end all Wars”. In 1939, as men in their 50s and 60s, my relatives step up to serve their country once again: Arthur Billson becomes Chairman of the Leicester War Charities Committee, Roland Barker serves in the Home Guard, and Walter Shimeld becomes an Air Raid Precaution warden. Over in Australia, Sidney Barker needed lengthy stays in sanatoriums to help manage the bovine tuberculosis he'd contracted whilst on military service.

Our family is not especially remarkable but – like many other family historians as we approach the centenary commemorations – I shall feel a flush of pride at realising quite how brave and honourable they were. Ted, Arthur, Roland, Sid and Walter, I salute you.

Auntie Mabel: inspiring family histories

To read Graham's previous 'Trading Stories, Working Lives' articles – and for ideas on writing your own family history – visit www.auntiemabel.org or follow him on Twitter [@auntiemabel.org](https://twitter.com/auntiemabel.org)