

OCTOBER 1914

FIRST BATTLE OF YPRES

The 'race to the sea', the mutual endeavour of both sides to turn the other's northern flank, continues apace. It was a period of continuous, prolonged and ruthless engagements. Our troops had no rest. They were outnumbered and outgunned. The fighting was largely individual. In shallow trenches, shell holes and during terrible weather made worse by the destruction of drainage our soldiers had to try and survive.

Astonishingly, no-one from 'greater Wilmslow' perished. The **1st Battalion of the Cheshire's** fought in France at **La Bassee, Violanes and Armentieres**. Fighting in drenching rain they first attacked, but then spent most of the month in stubborn resistance preventing the Germans from reaching the Channel ports. By the end of the month the battalion had practically ceased to exist, having lost 7 commanding officers in 3 weeks or so. Lieutenant T L Frost, son of the Mayor of Chester, was the last survivor of the officers who had originally landed in France in August.



Similar devastation reduced the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to a shadow. Sandwiched between the Belgians and the French, we were ordered to defend a thinly held line. The Germans concentrated their forces east of the town of Ypres searching for a breakthrough. Supported by French reinforcements, in the fiercest of 3 defensive battles (Langemark, Gueluvelt and Messines) from 21st October to 11th November – collectively called the **First Battle of Ypres** - we repeatedly repulsed mass attacks. This was achieved through disciplined and accurate fire, vicious close-quarter fighting and inspired counter attacks eg famously the 2nd battalion Worcester's on 31st October. Despite a numerical superiority of 2 to 1, the enemy failed. The battle is therefore seen by many as an allied victory. Action now petered out. Both sides dug in. The lines settled down for the winter, thus forming the **Ypres Salient**, a saucer-shaped, defensive front bulging into the enemy position. Shallow trenches became deeper. The awful **trench warfare** of popular imagination began in earnest as “amenities” like barbed-wire, sandbags, communication trenches, covered shelters, cooking facilities and rum rations were added. This tiny unoccupied corner of Belgium became symbolic to the Allies. Here for 4 terrible years we endured continuous bombardment from the enemy on higher ground losing countless lives in the defence of the town.



A vivid impression of the conditions under which the BEF fought in October 1914 can be gleaned from letters sent home by **Second Lieutenant Arthur Tylston Greg** whose father owned Norcliffe Hall and alot of the Styal Estate. (His father also part-owned Quarry Bank Mill in Styal with his brother, Arthur's uncle.) The eldest son of the family, Arthur was with the Cheshire's but was attached temporarily in September to the 2nd battalion Sherwood Foresters. One of the first local officers to see action, he describes a period of heavy entrenching. "We were 3 nights in the train and pretty tightly packed. We were frightfully outnumbered at first about 3 to 1 ...just opposite the crack Saxons...enduring artillery fire... snipers...and 'coal boxes' (high explosive shells) that dig great holes in the ground large enough to bury several horses. We all got wet through. We were digging hard and all that night there literally wasn't 15 seconds without at least 4 or 5 shells flying in the air. It is cold and there are no blankets or anything...I haven't had any of my clothes off for over 10 days. We only have what we can carry on us... We have to go out and forage for bread and butter. The inhabitants have practically quitted and left their livestock behind to starve ... we have had chicken for dinner several times as a result ... every night the Germans set fire by means of shells to several farms. It is a curious sight, our men digging and the landscape lit up with flames. The sky is lit up by flash after flash, it looks like glorified lightning or bonfire night."



Greg was invalided home for a short time over Christmas 1914. Returning to the Front in early 1915 with the **1st Cheshire's**, he was severely wounded on 8th May. On rejoining his regiment he was promoted to Captain. In September 1916 he was selected as a candidate for the Royal Flying Corps only to lose his life, aged 22, shot down in "bloody April" 1917 during the **Battle of Arras**. He is buried at Jussy Communal Cemetery 13 km south of St Quentin.



Arthur Tylston Greg

Jon Armstrong and Alan Cooper
Wilmslow Historical Society

