

Fishergate, Fulford & Heslington
Local History Society

FISHERGATE SCHOOL



Photograph taken on 9th August 1895, eight days after the school opened, with the Headmaster, George Barker on the right and possibly Edward Hope Hawthorne on the left. *Photo courtesy York Explore*

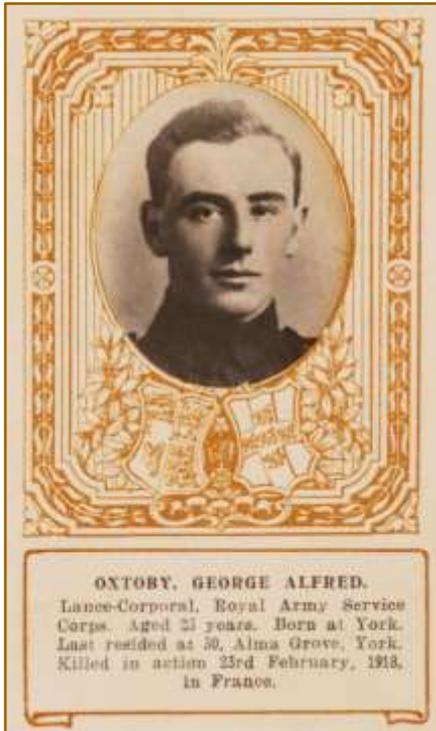
GREAT WAR MEMORIAL

REMEMBERING THE 86
FORMER PUPILS

GEORGE ALFRED (FRED) OXTOBY

1894 - 1918

T4/249586 LANCE CORPORAL
1st COMPANY 49th DIVISION TRAIN
ROYAL ARMY SERVICE CORPS



After much research we are of the opinion that the 'Fred Oxtoby' named on the Fishergate School memorial is George Alfred Oxtoby. Fred was probably the name his nickname.

George Alfred was born in the first quarter of 1894 to parents Alfred and Isabella Oxtoby (née Blakey) both of whom were born in York in 1858 and 1859 respectively.

Alfred and Isabella were married on 16th January 1886 at St Denys Church, Walmgate, York. In the 1891 Census they lived not far from the church at 6 Margaret Street (red oval on map). Alfred aged 33 was a surgical instrument maker and Isabella (32), a housewife. After three years of marriage their first and only son, George Alfred was born.



When George Alfred was just 3 years old in 1897, his father died leaving his widowed mum to care for him. The following year on 1st May 1898 she married William Potter at St Crux Church, Pavement, York.

By 1901 the family had moved nearby to 3 Edwin Street, off Hope Street. William Potter aged 43 was working as an engine fitter. Isabella cared for George Alfred (7) and a new toddler, John William Potter (2). George Alfred would have attended Fishergate School, a short walk away.



The family moved back to Margaret Street by 1911 and lived in a 4-room house at number 17. Isabella ran the house and William worked as a fitter for the railway. George Alfred (17) was an apprentice electrician and John William (12) was at school. They would be familiar with this view down Walmgate to the Bar.
(photo from yorkmix.com)

George enlisted in York and joined the Army Service Corps. The 'T' prefix of his service number T4/249586 indicates that he was in the Horse Transport section. His rank of Lance Corporal was held by specialists such as clerks, drivers, signallers and machine-gunners.

The officers and men of the ASC – sometimes referred to in a jokingly and in a disparaging way as *Ally Sloper's Cavalry* – were the unsung heroes of the British Army in the Great War. It was the ASC's job to provide all that was required to maintain a vast army on many fronts and most of this was supplied from Britain.



Soldiers cannot fight without food, equipment and ammunition nor can they move without horses or vehicles. Thus, transport of all kinds was essential: horse-drawn and motor vehicles, railways and waterways were used by the ASC which performed prodigious feats of logistics. Their organisation was considered one of the great strengths by which the war was won; and at its peak, the ASC numbered an incredible 10,547 officers and 315,334 men.



The largest element of the ASC was the Horse Transport section and most Companies were under orders of Divisions and normally four were grouped into a Divisional Train. Other Horse Transport Companies were part of the Lines of Communication, Auxiliary Supply Companies or Reserve Parks. The photo shows ASC horse

wagons near Albert, 1917. (photo, IWM image Q4631)

George may have enlisted as early as 1914 and been on leave in late 1917 when he married Irene Constance Woods from York. It would be a short marriage, because George was sent back to the front and fighting near St Omer when he was wounded on 23rd February 1918.

He was taken to the 15th Casualty Clearing Station, where he died from a fractured skull aged 23 years.

(photo from Wikipedia)



Clearing stations were part of the casualty evacuation chain, further back from the front line than the Aid Posts and Field Ambulances. They were manned by troops of the Royal Army Medical Corps as well as Royal Engineers and men of the Army Service Corps. Where possible, they were located on or near railway lines, to facilitate movement of casualties from the battlefield to a hospital; and could move their location according to the needs of the war



George Alfred was buried Longuenesse (St. Omer) Souvenir Cemetery, Pas de Calais, France, IV. F. 57.

The cemetery takes its name from the triangular cemetery of the St. Omer Garrison, properly called the Souvenir Cemetery (Cimetiere du Souvenir Francais) which is located next to the War Cemetery.

The Army Register of Effects shows that his widow Irene was George Alfred Oxtoby's sole legatee

His last known residence was 30 Alma Grove, near the Barracks, where Irene was living in 1920.

George Alfred is commemorated on the memorials in St Denys Church, Walmgate and in Fishergate School. He has an entry in the *King's Book of Heroes*.



REMEMBERED WITH HONOUR

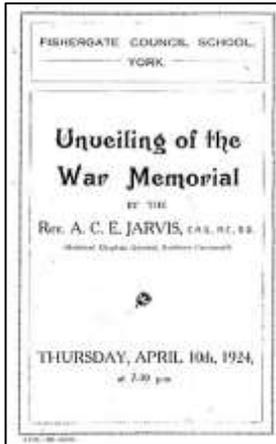
GEORGE A OXTOBY



AGED 23 YEARS

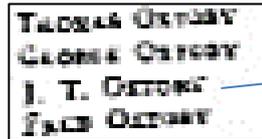
J T OXTOBY

WHO WAS J T OXTOBY



We have struggled from the beginning of our research over the identity of this man. Was he a soldier, sailor or airman? Was his name included by mistake? His name is not on the memorial plaque in the entrance to Fishergate School.

However, a 'J.T. Oxtoby' is included in the architectural drawing for the memorial plaque which was part of the programme for the 1924 unveiling ceremony (detail, below).



Although the surname Oxtoby is well recognised in York, we cannot find a family link to J T. It does not occur in the family names of the Oxtoby's that owned the painting and decorating business in Fishergate. Neither do searches of other local memorials to those who died 1914-1918 give us any leads

Neither is he listed in the Anglican churches of St. Denys, St. Lawrence, St. Margaret in York or St Oswald's in Fulford; nor at the Methodist Chapel at Melbourne Terrace and the Catholic Church of St George's Catholic Chapel.

The experienced local genealogist, David Poole, suggests:

"...possibly Fred Oxtoby's parents submitted his name to the school, as also did his widow, the two submissions being for different forenames, Fred and George Alfred, depending on how he was known by the submitters. However, one would have thought that the school at the time might have done some basic work to bring 'George, 'Fred' & 'J T' together, possibly checking the registers of a few years previous".

David Poole also said that he could not *"find any birth of a J. T. Oxtoby anywhere in England, 1875-1905. He does not appear in the list of ten men called Oxtoby on the Commonwealth War Graves casualty list [and that] the name is uncommon, mostly occurred in the East Riding".*



David noted that the *"Thomas Edward Oxtoby' named on the Fishergate School memorial is very likely to be the same as 'T E. Oxtoby' named on the Archbishop Holgate Grammar School memorial, aged 20, of 5 Fishergate".* (his biography follows)

He also noticed the *"rather odd possibility; that if the entry was a late addition, someone may have mistakenly made a 'partial' duplication of the very near entry of 'J T Peacock'."*

The memorial was not erected until 1924, so memories will have faded and it is probably inevitable that some mistakes were made.

If there was a J. T. Oxtoby, we would like to remember him.

REMEMBERED WITH HONOUR

J T OXTOBY



AGE UNKNOWN

THOMAS EDWARD OXTOBY

1897 - 1917

40582 PRIVATE 17th BATTALION
ROYAL SCOTS (LOTHIAN REGIMENT)



Thomas Edward Oxtoby was born in 1897 to parents Thomas Metcalfe Oxtoby and his wife Louisa (née Mawson). Thomas Edward was christened on 30th May 1897 at New Street Wesleyan Chapel, York.

His father Thomas had been born in Halifax in 1871. Louise, two years his junior, was a York-born girl.

Thomas arrived in York in the 1880s when he was still a school boy and lived at 22 George Street in the Walmgate area. By 1891 when he was 20, he had moved nearby to 2 Wilson's Gardens and was working as a housepainter.

Thomas and Louisa were married in York some time during 1896 and by the 1901 Census they had moved into Fishergate and lived at number 5 with their son Thomas Edward aged 3.

By 1911 we have a much clearer idea of this family who are living at 5 Fishergate, York. Thomas senior aged 40 was now firmly established as a house painter and decorator with employees and Louisa (37) assisted in the family business. They would be familiar with work depicted in Gustave Caillebotte's, *The House Painters*.

(image from wikiart.org)



Number 5 Fishergate was where Thomas established the painting and decorating firm 'T, M. Oxtoby & Sons' which, at one time, employed 30 full time people. They traded for 104 years from 1889 to 1993 when they went into voluntary liquidation. Their premises, now 16 and 16A Fishergate, are shown in the photo above and the façade is an example of their skills. We are glad it has recently been restored.

In 1911 Thomas and Louisa had been for 14 years and all five children were living. Thomas Edward (13), Donald Francis (7) and Frank (5) were at Fishergate School, and Ernest (2) and Barbara Louise (2 months) were at home.

Thomas Edward was a promising scholar and spent his final school years at Archbishop Holgate's Grammar School. Subsequently he trained for a City of London Guild examination and was awarded first-class honours in theory and practice as a decorator, securing third prize in a competition open to all England.

In 1916 Thomas enlisted when he was 18 years and 9 days old. His papers record that he was just under 5 feet tall and in good physical health. Apparently, he first joined a cavalry or dragoon regiment which sailed from Folkestone on 14th December 1916 and arrived in Boulogne the same day. He was assigned to No. 20 Infantry Base Depot and later posted to the 5th Reserve Cavalry Regiment.



On 18th December 1916 Thomas Edward transferred to the 7th (Service) Battalion of the Royal Scots Lothian Regiment. This infantry battalion had been formed in Edinburgh in February 1915 by Lord Rosebery as a Bantam Battalion for men under the regulation height of 5-feet 3-inches tall. Many miners and farmworkers were of small stature but tough and physically fit as Thomas Edward seems to have been.

In June 1915 the 7th Battalion was in northern England at Masham, when they were attached to the 106th Brigade, 35th Division; and by February 1916 had landed at Le Harve and made their way to the St. Omer area.

From December 1916 to August 1917 Thomas took part in a good deal of fighting with the 7th Battalion as a Lewis gunner. The Lewis gun was a light machine gun of USA design that was adopted and mass-produced in the UK and widely used by British and British Empire troops.

(poster and photo from relevant wikipedia entries)



During the 'Action of August 1917 troops were ordered to carry out local attacks with the aim of gaining 'jumping off positions for a general attack on 25th August. On this day, he seems to have gone out with a working party when the enemy attacked and occupied their trench. By the time his fellow soldiers had recaptured the trench, there was no trace of him.

Thus, on 25th August 1917 Thomas Edward was reported missing in action, but would not be until 31st August that his body was found. It was determined that he had been killed by the explosion of a shell. He was just 20 years old.

The Fishergate School Headmaster's Log Book preserves a clipping from the *York Herald* which give additional information. It is dated 7th December 1917.

YORK SOLDIER KILLED BY SHELL EXPLOSION. An Old Boy of Archbishop Holgate's School.

Official intelligence has been received by Mr. and Mrs. T M Oxtoby, 5 Fishergate, York, that their eldest son Private Thomas Edward Oxtoby, who was posted as missing since August 25th, is now reported as having been killed in action on that date. The deceased soldier was 20 years of age. He was educated at Fishergate and Archbishop Holgate's Schools and upon leaving the latter seminary joined his father in the firm of Messrs. T. M. Oxtoby and Son; he competed in the City of London Guild examination and came out with first class honours in theory and practice as a decorator, securing also the third prize open to all England. Joining the Dragoons in May, 1916, he was transferred in the following December to the Royal Scots, being drafted overseas in the same month. The deceased took part in a good deal of fighting and eventually became a Lewis gunner in his battalion. An officer of the company in which the late Private Oxtoby served, sent letters to the parents, that their son had written. Thomas had gone out with a working party in the morning of August 25th, the enemy attacked and occupied the trench for a day; it was recaptured at night but there was no trace of the men who went out with the party. The battalion moved soon after, and the body of the deceased was found by men of another unit of October 31st. He had been killed by the explosion of a shell. The body was disinterred and buried in a cemetery behind the line.

It is most unfortunate that his Battalion moved to another position before recovering his body, but very fortunate that it was found, identified and then given a burial in dangerous conditions.



Later the body of Thomas Edward would be disinterred from the site in Flanders and brought south to be re-buried in at Villers-Faucon Communal Cemetery Extension, Somme, I. E. 16.

Villers-Faucon is a village about 12 kilometres north-east of Peronne in the Somme area.

The Commonwealth graves in the Communal Cemetery are those of soldiers, who died in February-August 1917.

After his death, his parents received from the army his letters, a card and diary; and £15 14s 11d the amount recorded in the Register of Soldiers Effects. This would be little consolation for the loss of such a promising young man.

| Serial No. | Regiment | Soldier's Name | Regimental No. | Place and Date of Birth | Service No. | Rank | Company | Regiment | Date of Death | Place of Death | Remarks | Number of Effects | Amount of Effects | Remarks |
|------------|----------|-----------------------|----------------|-------------------------|-------------|---------|---------|----------|---------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|---------|
| 452000 | 4th Bn | Oxtoby, Thomas Edward | 452000 | 22 St. James St. York | 452000 | Private | 1st Coy | 4th Bn | 26 Aug 1917 | Villers-Faucon | 1st Coy 4th Bn | 15 14 11 | 15 14 11 | |

There is a headstone in York Cemetery that commemorates Thomas Brown and Emma Oxtoby his wife. It is also inscribed:

Thomas Edward Oxtoby, beloved eldest son of T. M. & L. Oxtoby, who died 26 August 1917, aged 20.

The inscriptions also record the kinship connection with the Oxtoby family in the Walmgate area of York, who were provision dealers and came from Stockton-on-the-Forest.



Thomas Edward is commemorated on the memorial in Archbishop Holgate's Grammar School. He is also remembered on the memorial in Fishergate School and has an entry in the *King's Book of Heroes*.

REMEMBERED WITH HONOUR

THOMAS E OXTOBY



AGED 20 YEARS