

# WOLVERTON AND THE TERRITORIAL FORCE 1908-1919



**1908.** On 31st March 1908 the 1st Buckinghamshire Rifle Volunteer Corps became the 1st Buckinghamshire Battalion, the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. Numbers six and seven Companies at Wolverton became F and G Companies with Captain L. C. Hawkins taking on the dual command. Every volunteer of suitable age was invited to join the new Territorials and about seventy per cent signed on for a four year term. The final parade of 250 of the old Volunteers was held in the old Drill Shed in Wolverton Works, where Major Williams said farewell. Major Williams was the only officer on parade, but Captain Hawkins was present in civilian clothes as a spectator. After the parade, the companies formed up in the Stratford Road, and after the Last Post and the Reveille were finally dismissed.

**1914.** When the Wolverton Companies of the 1st Bucks Rifle Volunteers were raised from 1877 on, the London & North Western Railway Company, owners of the Wolverton Carriage Works allowed the Volunteers to train in the "Large" Paint Shop. This they continued to do after 1908 when the Volunteers became the Territorial Force and became the Buckinghamshire Battalion, Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry.

**On Saturday 13th June 1914** a purpose built Drill Hall was opened by the Director General of the Territorial Force, General Bethune, for the Wolverton Companies (F & G) of the Buckinghamshire Battalion. It remained in military use until sold off in 1969, although during the intervening years many locals had passed through its doors attending non military events such as dances and dinners. It has always been known by locals as the "Drill Hall" and continues to be known as such despite it being renamed in the 1990's as the "Millmead Hall".

The buildings architect was John Chadwick of Bletchley who had strong links with the Volunteer and Territorial movements. It was constructed by the firm of "Messrs Archer" on land purchased from the Radcliffe Trust and St Bartholomews Hospital, and was built at a cost of £3132.



**1914.** In the lead up to the outbreak of the 1914-1918 War the Wolverton Companies of the Bucks Battalion, Territorial Force (TF) were at annual camp at Bovington Green, just outside Marlow where they had arrived on Sunday 2nd August 1914. They were roused in the early hours of Monday morning (3rd August) and told to return to Wolverton for impending mobilisation. Arriving back at Wolverton on the afternoon of the 3rd they were ordered to keep in touch with the Drill hall and not leave the town and to await further orders.

10/11/14

### MOBILIZATION.

No. *1011* Rank..... *Pl* Name *Section J*

Bucks Battalion Oxfordshire and Bucks Light Infantry.

#### LIST OF ARTICLES CARRIED BY RANK & FILE.

	Carried on Man.	Packed in Kit Bag.		Carried on Man.	Packed in Kit Bag.
Great Coat .....	1	—	Knife, Fork and		
Pay Book A.B. 64	1†	—	Spoon (carried		
Holdall .....	1*	—	in Haversack)..	1*	—
Brush, Shaving			Boots, Ankle Pairs	1*	—
(in Holdall) .....	1*	—	Braces, Pairs.....	1*	—
Brush, Tooth „	1*	—	Clasp Knife, with		
Comb .....	1*	—	Tin Opener ...	1*	—
Spare Pair			Flannel Shirts ...	1*	1*
Laces ... „	1*	—	Tunic.....	—	1
Razor and			Cloth Trousers...	—	1
Case .....	1*	—	Cloth Service Cap	—	1
Soap, Pieces „	1*	—	Shoes, Canvas (if		
Housewife .....	1*	—	in possession)..	—	1*
Socks, Worsted,			Identity Disc with		
Pairs .....	2*	—	Cord .....	1†	—
Towels .....	1*	1*	Field Dressing (in		
S. D. Jacket .....	1	—	Skirt of Jacket)	1†	—
„ Trousers ...	1	—			
„ Cap .....	1	—			
Putties, Pairs ...	1	—			

\* Supplied by the soldier on Mobilization.  
† Will be supplied on Mobilization.

N.B.—N.C.O.'s and men must bring with them sufficient food for the day on which they join.

**The Dress on Mobilization is Marching Order, with Ruck Sacs.**



At 9.30pm Tuesday 4th August they were called back to the drill Hall. They were dismissed at 1.30am (5th) after breakfast some stayed at the hall and the remainder were allowed home. At 1.45pm they were again fell in and at 2.15pm on the 5th August the men of the Wolverton Companies were ready at the station to depart for HQ at Aylesbury. The “Wolverton Express” commented; “The scene at the station “beggared belief”. Nothing had been seen like it since the Boer War but it came a poor second. The band played and the crowds came out to give them a rousing send off”. The order to mobilise was received at Battalion headquarters at Aylesbury at 6.30 p.m. on August 4th. Due to a misunderstanding the Wolverton Companies train was put into a siding and did not join the rest of the Battalion in Aylesbury until the 5th August.

On the evening of the 5th, now complete the Battalion entrained for Cosham, the Battalion’s war station, where three days were spent in digging trenches on the hills overlooking Portsmouth harbour.

Entraining again on 9th August, the Battalion journeyed to Swindon, where a week’s hard training was carried out, and after this a succession of moves, partly by rail, but mostly on foot, carried it via Dunstable, Hitchin, Ware, Harlow and Great Dunmow to Chelmsford, where it arrived on 25th August. Here it remained for seven months, training vigorously for its dispatch to France.

During this period the Battalion adopted the universal 4 Company organisation by amalgamating the old company’s:

- |          |              |   |          |         |
|----------|--------------|---|----------|---------|
| <b>A</b> | MARLOW       | } | <b>A</b> | COMPANY |
| <b>B</b> | HIGH WYCOMBE |   |          |         |
| <b>C</b> | BUCKINGHAM   | } | <b>B</b> | COMPANY |
| <b>D</b> | AYLESBURY    |   |          |         |
| <b>E</b> | SLOUGH       | } | <b>C</b> | COMPANY |
| <b>F</b> | WOLVERTON    |   |          |         |
| <b>G</b> | WOLVERTON    | } | <b>D</b> | COMPANY |
| <b>H</b> | HIGH WYCOMBE |   |          |         |

In September 1914 the Buckinghamshire Battalion split to form a first line unit 1/1st Buckinghamshire Battalion and a Second Line unit 2/1st Buckinghamshire Battalion.

Later in November a third line draft producing unit was formed, 3/1st Bucks.







F Company (Wolverton) Chelmsford 1914



G Company (Wolverton) Chelmsford 1914

*The Wolverton Company's of the 1st Buckinghamshire Battalion, Chelmsford 1914*



## 1/1st BUCKINGHAMSHIRE BATTALION

**1915.** The 48th (South Midland) Division containing the **1/1st BUCKINGHAMSHIRE BATTALION**, part of 145th Infantry Brigade, proceeded to France on the 30th March 1915 landing at Boulogne. After three months in the line near Ploegsteert (known to the Tommy as Plugstreet) the battalion moved in July to the Hebuterne Sector on the Somme where it spent a year.

**1916.** During the 1916 Battle of the Somme the Battalion was in action for two periods, each of about three weeks, during which its most notable achievements were a very successful attack between Ovillers and the village fortress of Pozieres, and the capture and holding of the Skyline Trench immediately north west of Pozieres.



*1/1st Buckinghamshire Battalion in action at Pozieres – 23/24 July 1916 by W B Wollen.*

In the above action:- “D Company, under the splendid leadership of Captain E. V. Birchall, were able to carry out their orders to the letter, and by dint of following our barrage so closely as to be almost in it, captured the whole position single-handed. A Company were immediately sent up to assist D Company in the work of consolidation and the clearing of prisoners, who were appearing in considerable numbers, coming over the top. These prisoners soon repented of this, however, as a battery of German guns, either intentionally or thinking they were our men, landed several shells in their midst and “dropped” quite a number; the remainder took to the trenches. In all, the prisoners collected numbered two officers and about 150 men. One of these officers stated that the assault had taken them entirely by surprise as they were waiting for the barrage to lift, before manning the parapet; and declared his opinion that the success of our assault, where two previous ones had failed, was due entirely to the way in which we had hugged the barrage.”

Unfortunately Captain Birchall was seriously wounded in this action. He had commanded G (Wolverton) Company in pre war days travelling from his home in Gloucestershire to attend training. He was awarded the D.S.O for this action but unfortunately died of his wounds in hospital in August 1916.

“The death of Captain Birchall was a very real loss and sorrow to the whole Battalion. Probably no company ever had a better, fairer or more capable commander, and no officer a truer friend.”

**1917.** In January 1917, after a spell in the trenches at Le Sars, the Battalion took over the line at Biaches, south of the Somme, and from there took part in the advance through Peronne towards the Hindenburg Line. On the night of 16th/17th April the battalion carried out a brilliant night attack in pouring rain on the German strongpoint of Tombois Farm.

In August the Battalion took part in the Third Battle of Ypres making a very costly but successful attack near Langemarck, on the 16th, and after two more periods in the line, moved to Vimy Ridge.

In November 1917 the Division moved to Italy.

During its service on the Western Front the Battalion gained the following battle honours: - SOMME 1916, ALBERT 1916, BAZENTIN, POZIERES, ANCRE HEIGHTS, ANCRE 1916, YPRES 1917, LANGEMARCK 1917, POLYGON WOOD, BROODSEINDE, POELCAPPELLE and FRANCE AND FLANDERS 1914-18

**1918** At the end of February 1918 the Battalion took over the Montello Sector. After a short tour the battalion moved to the Asiago Plateau where it helped to beat off the great Austrian attack of June 15th.

On November 1st 1918 it took part in the attack north of Asiago, capturing Mont Catz and penetrating to a depth of about four miles. On the day of the Armistice the Battalion was fifteen miles inside Austrian territory after which it returned to Italy.

The Battalion had added to its battle honours: - PIAVE, VITTORIO VENETO and ITALY 1917-18. For their services in Italy the Battalion was awarded a diploma and facsimile in bronze of a gold medal presented by the King of Italy. Of all the infantry battalions on the Italian front only three were selected to receive this honour. The Battalion returned home as a cadre in March 1919.



*Gold Medal presented to the 1st Bucks by the King of Italy.*



## 2/1st BUCKINGHAMSHIRE BATTALION

**1914. The 2/1st BUCKINGHAMSHIRE BATTALION** was recognised as a separate unit on 26th September 1914. It was initially raised and commanded by Wolverton man Lieut-Col H M Williams who commanded the battalion in France until the end of July 1916. He had previously commanded the 1st Bucks Rifle Volunteers 1910-1914.

Lieut Col Herbert Martin Williams VD TD DL JP (1858-1927) was born at Wolverton and attended the local school. He entered Wolverton Works in 1872 as an apprentice under R. Bore, continuing his education at the Science and Art Institute. On completion of his apprenticeship he served in the drawing office, admin office and the Works, the latter as foreman under Bore and Park until 1898, when he was appointed Outdoor Assistant. Upon retirement from railway service in 1920, after 47 years service on the L and NWR Colonel Williams took up residence with his wife at Newport Pagnell.

On the formation of the Wolverton Works Company of the 1st Bucks Rifle Volunteers in 1877, he joined as a private and rose successively to Lance Corporal, Corporal, Lance Sergeant and was granted a commission as 2nd Lieutenant in 1880. He served through the intervening ranks to Lt Col and succeeded Lt Col Freemantle in the Command of the Bucks Battalion, Oxford and Bucks LI in 1910. Under his command the Battalion was regarded as one of the most efficient of the TA infantry units.

Upon his relinquishing the command in April 1914, on attaining the age limit, he was transferred to the Reserve, but on the outbreak of war in August 1914, he was placed on the active list. He raised and trained the Bucks Reserve Battalion (all local men), afterward designated 2/1st Bucks Battalion and commonly known as the 2nd Bucks. The battalion remained in the United Kingdom for training and garrison duties until proceeding to France.



*Officers of 2/1st Bucks Battalion prior to deployment to France 1916.*

*Lt Col Williams is seated in the centre of the photo.*

Compiled by Steve Berridge [www.lightbobs.com](http://www.lightbobs.com) 22/06/2014 (Revised 2016 & 2022)

**1916.** During May 1916 the battalion proceeded to France, as part of the 184th Infantry Brigade of the 61st (2nd South Midland) Division. On 19th July 1916 near Laventie, in an effort to divert German forces from the Somme the Battalion made a gallant attack in what is now known as the Battle of Fromelles alongside the Australian 5th Division and suffered heavy casualties. During this action the battalion was still commanded by Wolverton man Lieutenant Colonel H M Williams who during the whole of the seven hours bombardment of the 19th was in the front line, setting a fine example to his men under fire and he personally superintended the reorganisation of the Battalion after the attack. His services were recognised later by Mention in Despatches. The battalion later moved to the Somme.

**1917.** During the German retirement to the Hindenburg Line the Battalion distinguished itself before St Quentin, and later, after holding the line near Arras, moved north for the Third Battle of Ypres.

On 22nd August in the attack on Somme Farm, Aisne Farm and Kansas Cross Roads, it again distinguished itself.

Moving in November to the Cambrai area, the Battalion held the line in front of Villers Plouich during the German counter attack.

**1918.** In February 1918 on the reduction of Infantry Brigades from four to three battalions the 2nd Bucks Battalion was withdrawn to be disbanded.

In March as the 25th Entrenching Battalion it was heavily engaged in the fighting during the German Spring offensive from 21st March until on 7th April when it was finally amalgamated with the 2/4th (TF) Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry.

During its service on the Western Front the Battalion gained the following battle honours: - YPRES 1917, LANGEMARCK 1917, CAMBRAI 1917, ROSIERES, SOMME 1918 and FRANCE & FLANDERS 1914-18



After the war, to commemorate the men of the Wolverton Companies who did not return a tablet was obtained and engraved in their honour. It was originally displayed in the Wolverton Drill Hall but later joined the South African Tablet in the custody of the Wolverton Works Foreman's Association, where it remained until discovered in a rubbish skip along with the South African Tablet during the demolition of the "Works".

They were both retrieved and removed to be displayed for many years in Blakelands T A Centre.

Both tablets are now in the care of the Buckinghamshire Military Museum Trust (BMMT).



**IN MEMORIAM**

**IN GRATEFUL MEMORY OF THE  
MEN OF WOLVERTON COMPANY**

**OF THE BUCKS BATTALIONS**

**WHO LAID DOWN**

**THEIR LIVES IN THE**

**GREAT WAR**

**FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH**

**1914**

**1919**

**SOURCES**

Bill West – Moving Force

P L Wright – 1st Buckinghamshire Battalion 1914-1919

R B Crosse - A short history of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, 1741-1922 for the young soldiers of the Regiment