

*This is the Sixty-sixth of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church*

## **THE DEATH OF HERBERT WALTER BEEVIS On 18 October 1916**

### **Previous articles on WWI**

I thought that you might now wish to take a look at some more of the names that appear on our war memorial. Perhaps I may remind you that I have been trying to look at them in chronological order, starting with Article No 50 which looked at the death of Private Horace Albert Rump, who died on the Somme at the Battle of Delville Wood on 19 July 1916. This was followed by Article No. 51 which looked at the three men from the village who all died in April 1917 at various stages of the Battle of Arras. Finally, Article No. 52 concerned Private George Richard Harrold who died at Cambrai on 30 November 1917.

I had intended to continue with the chronological order by talking about the German Spring Offensive and the three men from the village who died during April 1918. However, this would have meant leaving out one other soldier who was killed much earlier on (18 October 1916), which was towards the end of the Somme Offensive. At the time, I knew very little about the circumstances surrounding his death, and I could not find enough material for an article. However, this is no longer the case.

### **The death of Herbert Walter Beevis**

This soldier was Private Herbert Walter Beevis who was in the 9<sup>th</sup> Bn. the Norfolk Regiment, which was part of the 71<sup>st</sup> Brigade. Initially this brigade was part of the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, but on 11 October 1915 it was moved to the 6<sup>th</sup> Division (swapping with the 17<sup>th</sup> Brigade). So we need to follow the fortunes of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division in order to determine where Herbert Beevis died on 18 October 1916.

This Division certainly fought at the Battle of Le Transloy (1-18 October 1916) so probably this was where Herbert Beevis died. Certainly, like Horace Rump, his name appears on the Thiepval Memorial. Le Transloy was a period of fighting in terrible weather in which the heavy, clinging, chalky Somme mud and the freezing, flooded battlefield became as formidable an enemy as the Germans. The initial attack began after a seven-hour bombardment at 3.15pm on 1 Oct, but it was not until the afternoon of 3 October that the initial objectives were secured. The follow-up attack was delayed by atrocious weather and did not start until 1.45pm on 7 Oct. It resulted in minimal gains and heavy British casualties.

Orders for a fresh attack, which were issued late on 13<sup>th</sup> October, ignored the frightful conditions and the physical state of the attacking troops. The subsequent early morning assault on 18 October witnessed desperate attempts to advance, but minimal gains were made against resolute defenders well supported by accurate artillery fire.

I have now found a very useful *Short History of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division* by Major-General T.O. Marden (Published: 1920). Chapter VI of this throws a little more light on what happened on 18 Oct 1916.

“The 6<sup>th</sup> Division was relieved by the 20<sup>th</sup> Division on 30<sup>th</sup> September, 1916, and the long struggle began for the possession of the high ground overlooking the Bapaume-Le Transloy Road. On 7<sup>th</sup> October XIV Corps (consisting of 20<sup>th</sup> and 56<sup>th</sup> Divisions) attacked with only partial success and the 6<sup>th</sup> Division was brought in again on the night of 8/9<sup>th</sup> October for a general attack on 12<sup>th</sup> October.

The enemy had dug a series of trenches, named by us as Rainbow – Cloudy – Misty – Zenith etc. a portion of which had been captured by us making a somewhat pronounced salient. All three brigades were in the line, the 71<sup>st</sup> Infantry Brigade (which included the 9<sup>th</sup> Norfolks) being in the salient, with the 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade on the right and the 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade on the left. The objective of the attack of 12<sup>th</sup> October was the line of trenches running north from Le Transloy. At 2.05 pm the flank brigades attacked, but with only partial success. The failure to make ground, which was general all along the British front, was attributed to a lack of surprise as we had bombarded the position for two days and we always attacked in the early afternoon. Further the ground was very heavy and observation very bad. The attack was renewed at 5.35 am, on 15<sup>th</sup> October, the 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade on the left attempting to seize those portions of Cloudy and Mild trenches, still held by the enemy. But this attack made little ground. A final attempt to push forward the line was made on 18 October by 9<sup>th</sup> Norfolks, but it was only partially successful.”

*It would seem likely that it was during this final, desperate assault that Herbert Beevis lost his life, but we cannot be quite certain about this. For, in the “Register of Soldiers’ Effects” the entry for Herbert Walter Beevis is only recorded as “Death Presumed” on 18 Oct 1916.*

### **The German withdrawal begins**

But, even while these battles were going on, the German high command was already making preparations to give up the ground and to withdraw into the impregnable defences that the British would come to know as the Hindenburg Line. The construction of this line - or rather, series of lines - had been spotted by British and French aviators as early as late 1916, and British patrols began to detect the withdrawal of German infantry from the Somme in mid-February 1917.

### **A note on the family of Herbert Walter Beevis**

He was born in Swanton Morley in the last quarter of 1891. In the census records we first find him in 1901, aged 9, the son of Alfred Beevis (an agricultural labourer, aged 38) and Ellen Beevis (aged 34), living in Town Street, Swanton Morley, together with his three brothers, Claude Harold (7), Frederick (5) and William (3), and his sister Ella (1). The 1911 census shows Herbert as a farm labourer, aged 19. By then, there were two additional siblings, Daisy (8) and Benjamin (5). They were all shown as living at Greengate, Swanton Morley.

Now, his father, Alfred, was also born in Swanton Morley, but his mother, Ellen, was born in Mileham. In the 1891 census Alfred was 28 and Ellen was 24, and they were living in 60 Greengate Road next door to George Tye and his family. In the 1881 census Alfred’s parents are shown to be William Beevis (a shepherd) and Sarah Beevis. They both died in Swanton Morley (William in May 1911 and Sarah in Jan 1913).

Living with them at Town Street was Alfred, aged 18, together with ten siblings.