

## JOHN BIDMEAD

Private

Labour Corps.

Died: 2 August 1919, aged 42

John Bidmead was born in Beenham in October 1876, the son of James and Sarah (nee Wigmore), also of Beenham; the birth was registered in Bradfield during the last quarter. The 1881 census shows John 4, living with the family on The Green comprising his mother, Sarah 33 described as an agricultural labourer's wife, and an older brother, James 7. In 1891, his father James 55 is described as an agricultural labourer born Woolhampton, wife Sarah 53 and their two sons James 17 and John 14 both agricultural labourers; note the ages of John's parents may be incorrectly recorded.

In contrast with many soldiers who died in the First World War, the army records for John are extensive and only a brief summary is given here. On 27 May 1894 John, aged 18yrs 8m whilst in the employ of a Mr Webb of Beenham, attested at Reading and joined the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment as Private 4805 but after just 274 days he resigned on 9 July 1895 for reasons that are unclear.

On 29 September 1898 at the age of 22, John again attested at Reading and re-joined The Royal Berkshire Regiment as private 5403. He was described as being 5ft 4in, fresh complexion, grey eyes, sandy coloured hair with a birthmark on his left forearm. Again, after just 94 days on 3 January 1899 he purchased his discharge upon payment of £10 for reasons unknown.

On 8 September 1900 whilst living at 7 Mount Pleasant, John married Martha Ellen Wheeler of Bucklebury (born April 1877) at Beenham parish church, the marriage being registered in Bradfield in the third quarter.

The 1911 census shows John 34, a carter and his wife Martha 34 still living at 7 Mount Pleasant together with their five children Frederick 10, James 9, Florence 7, Doris 1 and Jack 8 months. At this point they have had seven children but two have died.

On 28 December 1914 John now aged 38yrs 3m enlisted at Reading as Private 222074 in the Royal Berkshire Regiment. The records show that he had 8 children: Frederick John born 2 Jan 1901, Florence 6 August 1903, James Richard 9 February 1904, Doris May 19 June 1909, Jack 30 July 1910, Leslie 29 March 1912, Frank 18 August 1913 and finally Willie 5 Dec 1914; all born in Beenham.

Initially John was posted to the 3rd Battalion but on 21 January 1914 was transferred to the 1st Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment (Princess Charlotte of Wales's) and went to France on 26 January 1915. John's specific movements in France are not recorded but he was finally posted to the 205 Divisional Company Labour Corps on 6 July 1917 before being demobilised on 26 April 1919 aged 42.

John Bidmead died at the Sutherland War Hospital, Christchurch Road, Reading on 2 August 1919 of heart failure whilst in the Army Reserve. He was buried in grave 97, Beenham churchyard 6 August 1919.



Figure 1 Martha Ellen Bidmead

There is a significant number of records detailing exchange of correspondence between Mrs Bidmead and the Army office in Warwick. In one letter received 13 September 1915, Mrs Bidmead enclosed birth certificates for her children but noted that one, Frankie born 18 August 1913 had died on 2 June 1915. The death certificate showed he had died of measles and bronchitis. Mrs

Bidmead received a balance allowance of 2s 7d. Martha started to receive a widow's pension from 3 February 1920 amounting to 26s 8d per week together with an allowance of 29s 6d for her then four dependant children (Doris, Jack, Leslie and Willie).

At the time of the 1939 census, Martha was living at 10 Mount Pleasant described as performing unpaid domestic duties. Of John and Martha's children, Frederick John died in 1987, registered Southampton, James Richard married (1) Edith A. Rixon in 1927 (died 1929) and (2) Emily Prince in 1933. James and Emily were living at 14 Mount Pleasant in 1939; James died 1977, registered Newbury. Doris Mary married Joseph Nicholls and died 1979, registered Chilton & Beaconsfield. Jack Bidmead married Phyllis May Brazier and they lived in Bucklebury. Jack died 5 Sep 1944. Jack was Private 5347910, with the 9<sup>th</sup> Bn. Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment) and died in Pesaro, Italy during the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war; his name is also on the Beenham war memorial. Finally, William Leslie "Willie" married Edith Vera Goodenough and died 1996, registered Wallingford.