

JOHN MIDDLETON

Private

2nd Bn. Devonshire Regiment

Service No: 26333

Died: 31 July 1917. Killed in Action, aged 33

Quite how John Middleton came to Beenham is unknown but his part in the village was sufficient to get his name included on the war memorial. He was born in Washfield, Devon in 1883 the son of Richard and Elizabeth Middleton (widow Clark and formerly Hill) and spent much of his life there. His birth was registered in Tiverton in the last quarter of that year. Washfield is between Tiverton & Oakford and the family appear to have been long time farmers in the area. In 1891 John aged 7, was living with his parents on Hatherland Farm, with his step brother Thomas Clark 24, sisters Elizabeth 13, Emma 12 and Helena 9, brothers Fred 8 and Sydney 2. By 1901 the family have moved to Lodge Hill farm near Tiverton perhaps prompted by the death of John's father, Richard on 18 June 1900. In 1911 census John is recorded as a stockman on another farm in Tiverton, aged 27 and single. That he moved to Beenham some time after this time is certain but why is not so clear but one assumes he came as a stockman on one of the farms; at some point he joined the Devonshire Regiment, enlisting as Private 26333 at Newbury.

At the start of the war, the Devonshire Regiment had two Regular army battalions. In August 1914 the 2nd Bn. were in Cairo protecting the Suez Canal but returned to England on 1 October 1914. On 6 November 1914 they landed at Le Havre and by mid-November were at Messines. In December they captured a German position known as the Moated Grange and remained in this area until March 1915. An attack on Aubers Ridge in May 1915 cost 250 casualties but they remained in this sector until April 1916, moving to the Somme to prepare for the offensive. On 1st July, the 2nd Devons attacked between Ovillers and La Boiselle losing many to German machine guns in what they called Mash Valley. On 18th and 29th July at Cunchy they repulsed two German attacks before being withdrawn to rebuild their shattered Battalion. Returning to the Somme, on 8th/9th November they captured and consolidated a ridge near Le Transloy before being rested at Vergies. In early 1917 they followed up the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line and in March they were attacking Heudecourt and on 13th April, Villers Guislands.

In June 1917 they moved north to Ypres and prepared for an offensive due to start on 31st July. On the day John Middleton died, at 0350 on the 31st the 2nd Devons attacked from Railway Wood. That morning their Colonel was killed and 12 of their 20 officers and 230 of their men were killed or wounded.

John Middleton is commemorated on Panel 21 of the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission records that he was the "Son of E. Middleton, of Middle Hill Farm, Knowstone, Barnstaple, Devon". Knowstone is a village and civil parish situated halfway between the Tiverton and South Molton.



John is also commemorated on a plaque in St. Peter's Church in Oakford; the parish borders Somerset, the Exmoor National Park, and the River Exe. The commemoration states "26333 Private John Middleton of the 2nd Battalion, the Devonshire (sic). Son of Elizabeth Middleton (w). Born in Washfield in 1884 but lived in Beenham, Berkshire. Died 31 July 1917 aged 33".

In the next three weeks, three other Beenham men were to make the ultimate sacrifice; the impact on this small community cannot now be imagined.