

Pte. P.C.J.Cook – The Queen’s (Royal West Surrey Regiment)

Percy Charles James Cook was born in 1898, the son of James and Ellen Cook of Ifield Road, Charlwood. Percy was shown living there with his grandparents in the 1911 census and he is remembered on the Charlwood war memorial. We have not yet established his connection with Westcott, but at his enlistment at Horley his place of residence was shown as Dorking and he may have been living in Westcott at the time. His name is on the Holy Trinity war memorial, but not on the memorial at St John’s Chapel.

Percy’s entry in “Soldiers Died in the Great War” shows he enlisted with the 2nd/5th Battalion of The Queen’s and later transferred to the Royal Fusiliers, possibly serving in 1/3rd (City of London) Battalion. After a tour in Malta, this unit sailed to France in January 1917 and served on the western front for the rest of the war. In January 1918 the battalion absorbed the disbanded 2/3rd Battalion and was renamed as the 3rd (City of London) Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, part of the 58th (2/1st London) Division.

On 21st March 1918 the battalion was in the area of St Quentin and it was here that the German High Command launched ‘Operation Michael’. This was the start of the great spring offensive which aimed to break through the allied lines and capture the channel ports. In preparing for this the Germans were able to move nearly 50 divisions from the east after the Russian surrender in 1917 and the allies were heavily out-numbered. The Battle of St Quentin lasted from 21st to 23rd March and the British were forced to retreat. The German offensive continued until 4th April when the allied lines held and the advance of the German armies was halted. A stalemate followed until 8th August when the Allies’ counter-offensive began; this continued until the war ended on 11th November.

The losses on both sides in March-April 1918 were enormous. The Allies suffered 255,000 casualties and the Germans 250,000. We do not know what happened to Percy Cook. He died on 20th April 1918 and is buried in the Allied Extension of the Tournai Communal Cemetery. Tournai is some distance from the St Quentin area; it was captured by the Germans in August 1914 and remained in their hands until August 1918. This suggests that Percy was perhaps captured having been wounded and was taken to Tournai where he died as a prisoner of war - 75,000 British troops were taken prisoner in those desperate days of March-April 1918.

