

Looking for Private Nicholls

Ian Chambers included this in a booklet he prepared for a WFA-MK visit to Flanders on 29th July 2007.

After I had booked my seat on this trip I thought I would have a look at the details held by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, (CWGC) for the Ramparts Cemetery, (the nearest one to the centre of Ypres), to see if there were any graves of special note that I might spend a few minutes to visit. I soon found the following:

Private F. Nicholls, 10250, 1st Battalion Bedfordshire Regiment, KIA 13 March 1915, aged 21

At first glance there was nothing to make him stand out from the others, but then I saw the details for his next of kin:

Mr. & Mrs. Nicholls, 182 Simpson Road, Bletchley

I have been researching the Fenny Stratford War Memorial for a number of years and knew at once that his name was not on there.

Fenny Stratford and Bletchley were once two entirely separate places, over the years they grew together and the whole area for simplicity and administration purposes became known as Bletchley, but for anyone who grew up there, Simpson Road was in Fenny not Bletchley. So the first thing I did was to check the Bletchley War Memorial to confirm that he was not remembered on there either, and then the *Soldiers Died* database to see if this had any further information. This had the same information as the CWGC, (but spelt his name Nichols), and also that he was born in Bow Brickhill and lived and enlisted in Bletchley. Because of this I then checked the Bow Brickhill War Memorial, but he is not on there.

Next it was up to the library at CMK to see if there was an entry for him in the *National Role of The Great War 1914-18*: these entries had to be paid for by the soldier themselves, or if they had not survived, their next of kin, and so are not a complete record of everyone who served, this time my luck was in and his entry is as follows:

Having enlisted in June 1913, he was drafted to France at the outbreak of war, and took part in the retreat from Mons and the Battles of The Marne, The Aisne and La Bassée where he was wounded in October 1914. Invalided home, he was in hospital for three months and then returned to the Western Front, but was unfortunately killed in action at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle on March 13, 1915. He was entitled to the Mons Star, General Service and Victory Medals.

"He joined the great white company of valiant souls"

182 Simpson Road, Bletchley.

Next came the local paper, the *North Bucks Times*, I started by looking for a death notice and soon found the usual few lines of fact and sympathy in the issue for 27/03/15. So then I went back to 1914 and starting at the end of the year began working backwards to see if I could find a report of him getting wounded in the October of that year. I found it in the issue for 28 November, and in fact it was quite a large report:

Pte. F. Nicholls, whose parents reside in Simpson Road, Fenny Stratford, has been home for some time with a wound he received whilst fighting with the 1st Bedfordshire's, with whom he has seen 17 months service. He commenced active service by taking part in the now historic retreat from Mons and after a retirement to Dour and a further retreat to Le Cateau he arrived with his regiment at Compiègne. It was here that, following some heavy fighting; he got separated from the main body and was lost for a fortnight. During this period, he, together with about twenty or thirty of his companions, went through the terrible experience of having no food for three days.

They were travelling in a train the whole of the time and Pte. Nichols relieved his hunger and thirst by drinking the hot water from the engine. Eventually the party found their regiment and rejoined it at a small village in the Soissons district. After participating in the battle of the Aisne for just over a fortnight the Bedfordshire's journeyed westwards to Bethune, travelling by train and motor and marching part of the way. They then went on to La Bassee, about three miles to the front of Bethune, and on their arrival there in the afternoon they were attacked. Pte. Nicholls said they stuck in the village all night and at dawn they advanced. When it got light they found they were in front too far so they had to "stick it" until the next afternoon when they were able to retire. It was whilst retreating that Nicholls was shot in the left cheek. The bullet entered between the jaw and the cheekbone and after knocking six teeth out made its exit through the mouth. In his own words "it laid me out", and for about ten minutes he lay on the ground in a pool of blood. He struggled up again, however, and one can imagine his condition when it is stated that it took him about two hours to "crawl" three miles. His wound received attention and care at Bethune where he was in hospital all night. He was taken to the station by motorcar where he entrained for Calais and touched English soil again at Dover. He was in hospital at Brighton for a month and three days, and is now home on leave until Dec. 1st, when he has to return to the Bedford depot. Pte. Nicholls is the proud possessor of a cap, which he took from the head of a dead German. It is similar to those worn by Kitchener's men; of the Glengarry shape, blue and with no ornaments.

By now I had quite a lot of information, but one thing I did not have was his first name. A quick look at transcribed information from the 1901 census for Bletchley, Bow Brickhill and Fenny Stratford failed to throw up any likely candidates and I was beginning to wonder if I would be able to put a first name to Pte. Nicholls.

The last place I could think of trying was some hard copies of the *Soldiers Died in the Great War*, these were produced soon after the war and as far as I know were used to produce the *Soldiers Died* database, so in theory the books and the database should contain the same information. These were produced on a regiment-by-regiment basis, and although it has quite a few, the library at CMK does not have the full set, but it does have the Bedfordshire volume, and in it was the entry for Pte. Nicholls, and unlike the *Soldiers Died* database, this not only spelt his surname correctly it also gave his first name, Frederick.

Next stop was the 1901 Census, there was only one likely candidate, right name, right year of birth, but, not only was he living in Simpson it also stated that he was born there. So back to the War Memorials to check the one in Simpson, there is a Nicholls on there but the initial is R. This 1901 Census entry also highlighted something that had been bothering me for a little while, the CWGC and *National Roll of the Great War* both give his address as 182 Simpson Road, Bletchley, but as someone who's paper round included Simpson Road, I was fairly sure that this did not go up to number 182! So what could I do? Well the first thing I did was to go to the library to look at a map of the time, the nearest date I could get to the period in question was 1925, this actually showed that, certainly at that time, there were relatively few houses in Simpson Road. I then went down to Simpson Road, this confirmed my thoughts as it only goes up to the high 80's, before you come to houses that have only been built in the last few years.

I also went to Simpson Village, but this is about three miles from Simpson Road and it is hard to believe that there could have been any confusion about whether the family lived in Simpson Road, Bletchley or Simpson Village.

So, at the end of all of this, had I found Pte. Nicholls? Well I guess that the answer is yes and no. I now have his first name, know something of his experiences during the Great War and that his next of kin cared enough to pay for his memory to be preserved in print. However, I can't say definitively that I have found his family or home address and therefore can't really find any other details about him locally. I guess the last hope is that his papers survived the Luftwaffe and that these will lead me in the right direction, but that will have to wait until my next trip to Kew. For now all I can do is visit him today to pay my respects.

If you have a few minutes to spare, you might like to visit Frederick as well, he can be found at grave E7 of the Ramparts Cemetery.

Ian Chambers