



PERCY THOMPSON

**Pte. 515161, 14th London Battalion (London Scottish)
Died 16th August 1917, Halfway House, Zillebeke, Belgium**

The anguish of William and Annie Thompson can only be imagined as they



bid farewell to Percy from Wickhams Farm in February 1915. He was now their only child. William James, his elder brother, had tragically died five years before, aged only fifteen. Both boys had been to Pirbright School under William Frost, Percy going on to Guildford Grammar in 1912, where he

joined the O.T.C. His call-up had already been deferred on medical grounds while still only eighteen, in November 1916, but by this stage of the war, with casualties mounting, requirements had been relaxed and Percy was duly enrolled in March 1917 and posted to the 1/14th London Battalion's training camp at Hazeley Down, near Winchester.

The London Scottish, as they were called, were having a hard time that spring at Messines. Part of the 12,000 men of the 56th (London) Division, they had been mired in the mud of the Somme the previous winter before moving to Arras and involved from March to May, with heavy casualties, in two Battles



of the Scarpe, part of the larger Battle of Arras. This was no doubt why Percy was sent to join them, which he did on June 19th, just before the Division was moved again to the northern part of the Ypres salient, opposite Inverness Copse and Glencorse Wood in preparation for their next battle.

“Orders were received and issued so hurriedly that it was impossible for brigade and battalion staffs to keep pace with them. There was not time for the scheme of operations to be thoroughly explained to regimental officers, much less to the men”.

Thus, with hindsight, reported Brig.-Gen. Freeth on the preparations for what became known as the Battle of Langemarck, 1917. There were other factors, too, as Gen. Dudgeon, commanding the 56th Division, wrote later. August that year was one of the wettest on record. Boggy ground had made movement difficult & at times virtually impossible. The Germans had also prepared a system of defence in depth, so even while some of the exhausted troops did reach their objectives, they were then shelled, counter-attacked and forced back, in what had become a never-ending pattern at this stage of the War to end all wars.



Canadians in the mud of Langemarck

The London Scottish Battalion's role in this action was in a reserve Brigade as support behind two others, moving forward behind them twice during the day. Being in reserve was no picnic. It entailed slogging up to the rear of the forward infantry with essential supplies, mainly food, water and ammunition; hour after hour, knee-deep, sliding, falling and cursing in the slime, all the time under the threat of shelling. That accursed mud then almost became a blessing, absorbing the blast of even a near miss, but it was during a second move forward at 9 p.m. on that fateful Thursday that a direct hit by the shell with his name on it killed Percy Thompson and ten others of the carrying party.

With eleven Pirbright dead up to August in that anxious summer, William and Annie would have been dreading postmaster Harry Briant's knock, holding that fateful buff telegram. "Their Majesties regret....." Shortly afterwards came a letter from his Lieutenant. Here is part of it :-

"Your son was one of the newest members of my platoon, but during the short time he was under my command I found him to be always a good and earnest soldier, setting an excellent example to many men of older years and better experience."

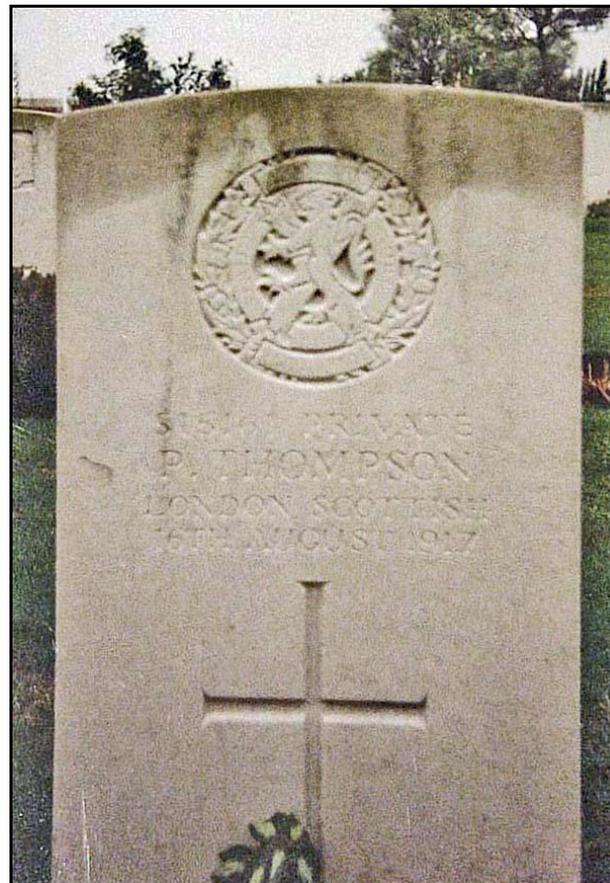
Scant consolation for the loss of an only son.

Well-loved and respected in the village, friends and neighbours, especially the Cherryman family at Causeway Farm, would have been sympathy and kindness itself in their grief, but you can see from their sad and dignified photos later that the light must have gone from their lives. They continued to live on at Wickhams, William farming in partnership with his younger brother Albert at West Hall. Still working on the land when he died in 1955 at the age of 89, he outlived her by a few months.



William & Annie Thompson in the 1930s

Percy lies buried in a corner of this foreign field, Perth (China Wall) Cemetery, called Perth by the Scottish Rifles and China Wall after the name of a communication trench



R.I.P.