

The story of John Willcox: First man from the Alnwick area to be killed in the First World War

**By
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John Willcox's war only lasted 20 days. He died on 24th August 1914 from injuries sustained during the retreat from Mons.

My brother-in-law, John Thompson, regularly spoke about his Great Uncle John Willcox who he knew had been killed at Mons in the early days of the First World War.

I was at Bailiffgate Museum one day looking through some old *Northumberland Gazettes* when I noticed a photograph of John Willcox, and was struck by the family resemblance.

SEPTEMBER 25, 1915

ROLL OF HONOUR.

Wounded and Missing.



Private John Willcox, 1st North'd. Fus.
Wounded & Missing, 24th August 1914.

Copy of John Willcox's photograph used in the 25 September 1915 edition of the *Alnwick and County Gazette*

I decided to investigate further and discovered during my research that he was, in fact, the first local man to be killed during the conflict.

His family was not told officially until March 1916 that their son had been missing since 24th August 1914, presumed killed during the retreat from Mons,

and his body had never been found. Two death certificates were issued for John, the first in 1914 and the second in 1915.

The information about his call-up through to his death comes largely from a transcript of the 1st Northumberland Fusiliers' official war diary. The information in the diary is sketchy and sometimes difficult to follow, but it's been copied faithfully, as have the newspaper reports, which at times show conflicting information – for example, the *Newcastle Chronicle and Journal* report of 26 July 1919 reports the correct date of death on the second line, yet a couple of lines later it refers to '*...killed in action on September 29 1914...*'.

John Willcox was born at home in the Turks Head Yard, Alnwick, on 11th June, 1884, the first child of Charles (*b. 1855*), who was a tailor, and Elizabeth Willcox (*b. 1856; née Dixon*) from Tenter Hill, Wooler.

In the 1891 census John is listed as living in Clayport Street, Alnwick with his father Charles, younger brother, Charles Henry (*b.1886*), and his mother's sister, Mary, who is listed as a visitor. His mother at the time of the census was with her parents at Tenter Hill, also listed at Wooler are two more children, daughters Mary E (*b.1888*) and Georgina who was 4 months old.

Moving forward to the 1901 census the family was living in Dispensary Street, Alnwick. Charles was still a tailor, and his son Charles Henry, age 15, was a watchmaker. The younger children were scholars. John, by this time age 16, was a Cellarman Brewery worker and lodging with Christopher Howe, his wife Mary and their daughter, Mary Ann, at 32 Narrowgate Alnwick next to '*Ye Olde Cross Inn*', known locally as the '*Dirty Bottles*'.

In 1902, John joined the 1st Northumberland Fusiliers as a regular soldier and served on the North-West Frontier of India. He was listed in the 1911 census as a 26 year old Private at the barracks of the battalion. John must have left the regular army sometime between 1911 and 1914 and become a reservist.

Unfortunately the records from this time were completely destroyed during the bombing of London in the Second World War.

When it became apparent that war was imminent in 1914, Regimental No. 737, Private John Willcox, aged 30, was called up and rejoined his old regiment.

A piece in the local paper at the time, under the heading '*Called Up*', reported:

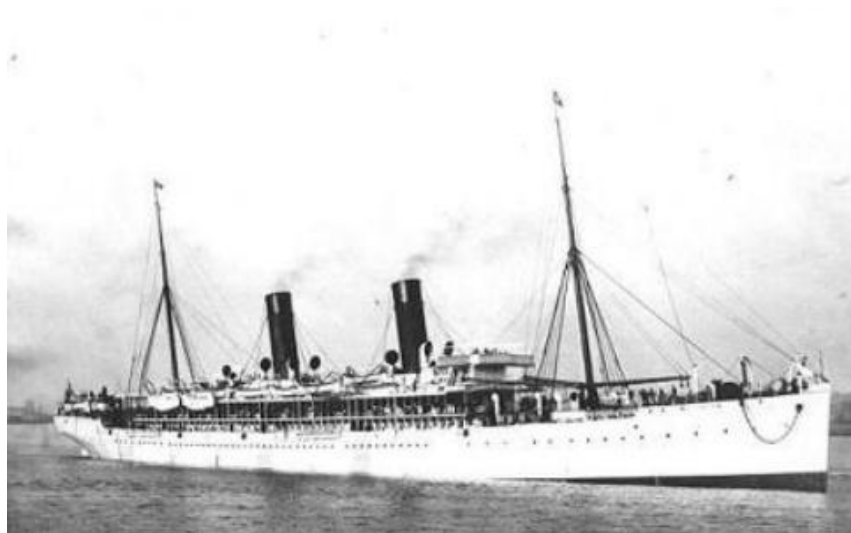
'Amongst those who have been called up in Alnwick, some of whom have gone through former campaigns, are, Tommy Scott and Tommy Allen, Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders; Flaxton Orange, Irish Fusiliers; J. Dixon and J. Willcox, 5th Northumberland Fusiliers; James Veall, 41st Regiment of Foot. There are several others, but their names were not readily ascertainable.'

The 1st Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers had returned from India only months before the First World War began, to start its home tour of duty at Portsmouth as one of four battalions in the 9th Infantry Brigade.

Entries in the battalion's war diary show that the order to mobilise was received at 6.00 pm on 4th August 1914. By 7.15 pm an officer and NCO had been despatched to Newcastle to collect reservists flocking into the regiment's depot to bring the battalion up its established war strength.

The following day, the battalion moved to Portsmouth Town, to undergo a medical inspection. Horses were also moved with more being collected on the way and were given veterinary inspections. During the following week more horses were brought from Hilsea and local farms and estates. Reservists arrived from various locations and, by 9th August, the battalion was ready to parade at war strength in full service order in front of Brigadier-General F. C. Shaw, Commanding Officer of the 9th Infantry Brigade (*which formed part of 3rd Division*).

On 13th August the Battalion left Cambridge Barracks, Portsmouth by two special trains for Southampton and embarked on S.S. *Norman*, with transport and horses embarking on S.S. *Italian Prince*. Embarkation was completed at 3.00 pm and, an hour later, the first ship sailed for an '*unknown destination*'. The 1st Battalion, Lincolnshire Regiment and the Headquarters of 9th Infantry Brigade were also on board. When they had been at sea for about an hour it was given out that they were destined for (Le) Havre which was sighted before midnight.



S.S. Norman, 1914 (Source: www.flickr.com)

S.S. *Norman* was built in 1894 by Harland and Wolff at Belfast for Union-Castle and used as a mail ship travelling between the U.K. and Cape Town in South Africa. As she had been built to Admiralty troopship specifications she was requisitioned for use during the Boer War in 1899. In 1900 she was transferred back to Union-Castle and refitted in 1904. She subsequently returned to mail work until she was replaced in 1910 by the S.S. *Balmoral Castle* and laid up at Netley in Southampton Water. At the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 she was immediately re-commissioned as a troopship to be part of the first convoy to take men of the British Expeditionary Force to France.

At 3.00 am on 14th August the S.S. *Norman* tied up at (Le) Havre. After disembarking, within an hour the men were marched 5½ miles N.N.E. to a rest camp. The weather was very hot and 82 men fell out during the march. The camp was not really ready to receive them and there was no water to wash or drink. Quite how long it was before water carts were available is not recorded in the war diary.

After a 12 hours delay at (Le) Havre, the horses and transport made their way to the camp. Some of the wagons broke down on the way, further delaying the convoy, and it was after midnight before the majority arrived.

The 15th August was very wet and the remaining transport had a slow, difficult climb up the 2 mile hill to the camp because of the heavy conditions.

At 5.00 pm that evening orders were received for the battalion to move to the railway station in readiness to entrain at 3.00 am the following morning. It

continued to rain until after midnight and the wagons had to be manhandled onto the road. The battalion paraded at midnight in the drenching rain, ready to move off.

The transport and horses moved off first. It was very dark and the horses were tired and caked in mud. The men soon followed but were held up for over 1½ hours because both water carts belonging to the Battalion overturned in the narrow lane leading from the camp.

It was 3.45 am before the men arrived at the railway station, which was only 3½ miles away. The whole battalion was put onto one train and left for Rouen, arriving at 10.45 am, where the men spent an hour drinking coffee provided by French officials. The battalion's destination was Busigny. During the journey they were greeted by enthusiastic crowds who gave them fruit, cigarettes and flowers. On arrival, at 9.55 pm, they were told that they had to travel on to Landries where they arrived at 11.30 pm and detained. The men were billeted in barracks evacuated by French Troops who had been sent to the front and the Officers were lodged in the local girl's school, also evacuated.

Next day, the 17th, the battalion marched 6 miles to Noyelles and were billeted in barns and farm houses. They remained there on the 18th until 20th August only leaving their billets for short route marches.

At 5.45 am on 21st August the men left Noyelles and marched the 12½ miles to Longville where the battalion was billeted. At 5.45 am next day the march continued to Cuesmes, near Mons in the province of Hainaut. 'B' and 'C' Companies were detailed to take up an outpost position on the Mons-Conde canal.

23rd August: The Battle of Mons

'B' and 'C' Companies, still in the position they had taken up the previous day, were strengthened by barricading the three bridges in their area and by fortifying the houses and barricading the streets south of the canal. The line was continued to the west by the Brigade and on the right by the Royal Scots Fusiliers.

At 11.00 am, 'C' Company was attacked by heavy shell fire which turned onto 'B' Company at noon accompanied by heavy rifle fire.

The enemy gradually massed in large numbers in the dead ground in front of 'B' Company and were able to bring 2 field guns to within 150 yards of the main barrier which was blocking the street leading to the bridge head.

The company were unable to locate the exact position of the enemy due to smoke from the guns and house fires, but they were under the impression that the Germans had suffered heavy losses. Three men from the company were holed up in a house next to the bridge when the house was shelled. One man was killed and the other two made their escape through the cellar. The bridge was now undefended and within 10 minutes of the explosion German troops began to stream over.

Meanwhile, at 10.00 am 'A' and 'C' Companies were sent to the northern outskirts of Cuesmes to take up position to cover the retirement of the support line. At 2.00 pm, they were again ordered to retire and followed 'B' Company west to Frameries. Unfortunately they were attacked from the west by a force of Germans who had followed behind. The Royal Scots Fusiliers were the first to meet this attack and suffered heavy casualties. 'A' and 'D' Companies (*John Willcox was a member of the latter*) were sent to their support and continued doing a flank guard movement until dark when the battalion concentrated on the high ground west of Frameries. The Lincoln's were on the right and the Worcester's on the left.

Eight Northumberland Fusiliers were killed and 11 injured although other regiments also suffered sometimes heavier losses.

24th August: The attack on Frameries

On 24th August, at about 3.30 am the Germans had located the battalion's position and opened heavy shell fire. The British guns were unable to respond for some time. At 7.00 am the Germans were held in check for a short time after being targeted by British artillery. However the brigade on the right of the Fusiliers started retreating and, soon after, the 9th Brigade was ordered to retire and fall back through the town of Frameries, where some street fighting took place.

After leaving Frameries, the brigade formed up 4 miles W.S.W. of the town and were halted for about 4 hours to allow the transport to get clear. In the evening the brigade continued the retirement and came into bivouac at Bermerries at 10.30 pm.

John Willcox's war was over. It is not clear at which point he lost his life, but he was part of 'D' Company which was sent to support the Royal Scots Fusiliers.

According to 1st Northumberland Fusiliers' war diary, he had been wounded during the retreat but, according to his death certificate, his date of death was 24th August 1914 and he was missing presumed dead.

Back in Alnwick, Charles and Elizabeth had no contact with their son since his mobilisation on 4th August 1914. Their second son, Charles Henry, aged 26, who was a miner at this time and married with 2 small children, joined up on 1st September 1914. The family believe that Charles wanted to go out to France to look for his brother. He was later invalided out of the army and received an army pension. His name appears on the Roll of Honour in The Northumberland Hall Alnwick.

On 17th April 1915 the local paper reported:

'Alnwick Soldier Reappears

Private Jack Willcox, 1st Battalion Northd Fusiliers, son of Mr Charles Willcox, Alnwick wrote to his mother last week that he was all right and coming out of the trenches for two days. Private Willcox has been out at the Front since the war began and this is the first that has been heard of him.'

A week later the same paper reported:

'Private Jack Willcox, Alnwick

We now learn from the parents of Private Jack Willcox, 1st Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers, son of Mr. Charles Willcox, Alnwick that he had not written home as stated last week.'

On September 25th 1915 the paper carried a photograph of John, headed:

'ROLL OF HONOUR

"Wounded and Missing"

Private John Willcox, 1st Northld. Fus. wounded in action 21st September 1914.

*Private John Willcox. No. 737 was wounded in action on 27th September 1914 place not known. He is the eldest son of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Willcox, Dispensary Street, Alnwick. Any information will be thankfully received by his parents from any of his comrades or friends.
(other papers please copy)'*

The dates published 21st and 27th September 1915 – over a year after he was last heard of – show that no one actually knew what had happened to John. Two death certificates were issued for him, one for August 1914 and another for 1915. His body was never found.

Charles and Elizabeth Willcox were not told until March 1916 that their eldest son had in fact died on 24th August 1914.

John is *'Remembered with Honour'* on the La Ferte-Sous-Jouarre Memorial, which is located 66km east of Paris. The memorial, unveiled in 1928, commemorates 3,740 officers and men of the British Expeditionary Force who fell at the battles of Mons, Le Cateau, the Marne, and the Aisne between the end of August and early October 1914 and have no known graves.

He is also remembered on several memorials at Alnwick, notably the War memorial at the junction with Denwick Lane and the Roll of Honour in the town's Northumberland Hall, and others which are listed on the North East War Memorial Projects website.

On 26th July 1919, the Newcastle Chronicle and Journal reported:

'Willcox, Pte. J., 1914:

On the La Ferte-Souse-Jouarre Memorial is the name of 737 Private John Willcox, serving with the Northumberland Fusiliers who died 24/08/1914.

Mr. and Mrs. Chas Willcox of the Town Hall, Alnwick, have received the Mons star and medal, to which their son, Private John Willcox, was entitled, but who was killed in action on September 29 1914. Private Willcox had seen 12 years service with the 1st Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers and held the medal for the Indian Campaign with clasp. He was on the reserve when the German war broke out.

John Willcox is fondly remembered by his extended family who brought his story to my attention.

Much has been about the battle and retreat from Mons in August 1914, but the information related here has come from the battalion's war diary written at the time and which was found on the website The Long, Long Trail – <http://www.1914-1918.net/>.

Other sources used include:

North East War Memorial Project website - www.newmp.co.uk;

'Find my Past' website - www.findmypast.com;

Records held by Adrian Ions and at Bailiffgate Museum, Alnwick;

Family members, in particular John Thompson, great nephew of John Willcox and grandson of Charles Henry Willcox.