

Ashville Cenotaph: **WOOLFENDEN R**

Ashville Memorial Hall: Ronald Woolfenden, Royal Fusiliers

Both correct.

Date & place of birth: Ronald was born on 31st October 1895 in Reddish, Stockport, Lancashire.

Connection with Methodism: None detected to date, in fact the opposite as Ronald was baptised in the Parish Church. He definitely attended Elmfield College as he appears on their 1911 Census Return.

War: Ronald's War Service Records have not survived but there is a lot of information about his war service available from other sources.

He enlisted on 5th September 1914 as a Private into the 20th (University and Public Schools) Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers. After a year's training the Battalion moved to the Western Front on 14th November 1915. At some stage, possibly, at the time of the move to France, Ronald was temporarily assigned to the 251st Field Company of the Royal Engineers. This unit was a tunnelling company responsible for mining under enemy trenches and setting off explosives to destroy them. Perhaps during his training Ronald had shown an aptitude for handling explosives. The unit's war diary shows the explosive used was Ammonal, a mixture of ammonium nitrate and aluminium powder, and the usual charge was a ton.



The notes in the 20th Battalion's War Diary for the period 9th to 17th June contain the following comment: "Information received that 5969 Private Woolfenden R has been awarded the Military Medal whilst attached 251st Company RE." The Roll of Honour for the University of Manchester adds this detail: "He was awarded the Military Medal when he rescued some miners after an explosion in a tunnel they were digging."

Shortly afterwards he returned to the 20th Battalion and was involved in the major attack by the 19th Brigade on High Wood as part of the Somme Offensive. The Battalion War diary has this to say about the 20th July 1916: "19th Brigade attack at 3.25 AM on HIGH WOOD: attack by CAMERONIANS and 5th SCOTTISH RIFLES, 20th ROYAL FUSILIERS in support, 2nd ROYAL WELSH FUSILIERS in reserve. North corner & North west corner of wood not taken, rest taken & consolidated. 2nd ROYAL WELSH FUSILIERS came up about 12 noon. A front & support have consolidated across wood East to West with a strong point about S.4d.2.8 in support line. Held on to this position until relieved by 100th Brigade at midnight then withdrew to old bivouacing ground MAMETZ WOOD. Casualties: Lt Col. Bennett wounded: killed Lt Rawson, Lt Palmer, 2nd Lt Price, 2nd Lt Coventry: missing 2nd Lt Hume: missing believed killed Capt Toller, Lt Wallworth, Lt Evans: wounded Capt Hollingworth, 2nd Lt Bell, 2nd Lt Cooke, 2nd Lt Fabricus, 2nd Lt Ives, 2nd Lt Herbert. Other ranks: killed, wounded & missing 375."

So in one day the fighting capacity of the Battalion had been reduced by 40% assuming it started the day at full strength (~1,000 of all ranks). As in three days time they received 702 reinforcements they must have started out the 20th July 1916 at about two-thirds strengths and lost half their effective fighting capacity that day.

The next day the shattered battalion was withdrawn from the front line and spent the following ten days "re-organising". Five of the Battalion's Privates received Military Medals for their gallantry on the 20th July. They were held in reserve until 6th August when they went back into the front line at one time holding the eastern edge of High Wood. The War diary summarises the casualties during August and records that

between 6th and 31st August the Battalion suffered the following casualties: 2 officers killed, 2 officers wounded, 23 other ranks killed, 137 other ranks wounded, 11 other ranks missing.

All sources say Private Ronald Woolfenden died on 20th August 1916. He was buried in the front-line war cemetery at Daours. There is slightly less consensus on how he died but probably from wounds received in fighting in the vicinity of High Wood. If the wounds had been incurred on 20th July he would, in the ensuing month, surely have been evacuated out of the war zone and not have been buried in a front-line cemetery. So his fatal injuries were probably incurred in the period 6th to 19th August.



This is High Wood today – when Ronald died there was hardly a tree standing!

You will have noticed the understatements in the Battalion War Diary – this is typical of Battalion War Diaries – the best I have come across is “A very quiet day. 3 OR wounded, 3 OR killed”.

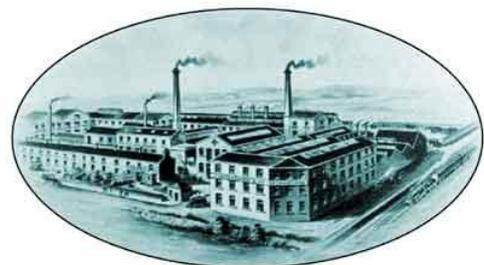
Family life: Ronald was baptised in the Parish Church on 21st November 1895. The 1901 census tells us his father, Robert Schofield Hopwood Woolfenden was a solicitor. His mother was Lillie Bell.

The 1911 Census tells us that Ronald, aged 15, was in attendance at Elmfield College and he had two siblings – Janet 8 years younger & Ellis 10 years younger.

Other sources all say Robert attended Stockport Grammar School as well as Elmfield College. As he was at Elmfield in 1911 and, according to Manchester University, he started a law degree there in 1912, presumably he started his secondary education at Stockport Grammar School and then transferred to Elmfield. He seems to have gone up to University just before his 17th birthday, so either he was extremely bright or Manchester University have got it wrong. Whichever he would not have had time to complete his law degree before he enlisted.

Besides the Elmfield memorials at Ashville and his headstone at Daours Communal Cemetery in France, Ronald is also named on the Stockport War Memorial in the Art Gallery and on the South Reddish War Memorial. He appears on the Manchester University Roll of Honour.

The Woolfenden family were of note in Stockport. Three of Ronald’s great-uncles founded a silk and felt hat making business in the Denton area of Stockport. At the time of the Great War it would have been a major employer. On the right is an artist’s impression of the Woolfenden Hat works in its heyday. It closed down during the Second World War.



David Redhead, March 1918