

## **An Ordinary Man in Extraordinary Times**

### **Cecil Reuben Charles Bichard**

The following letter was sent to me by Valerie Sarre and was from her relative Cecil Bichard. It gives an insight into how the lives of ordinary families were affected by the war. Under normal circumstances Cecil would probably have never left Guernsey, and would have lived out his allotted time working in the Island's horticulture industry alongside his family instead of dying of wounds after three years at the various battlefronts.

*'Dear Mother and Father*

*Just a few lines in answer to your welcome letter which found me quite well. Glad to hear you are the same. When I did not receive any letter I thought you had forgotten me and I was going to write again but I had your letter on Tuesday and was very pleased to have it. Well you say you were thinking of me, I've been doing the same thing of you all the week. It's already a week and as you say I will try and get one for Bank Holiday. I hope you like your new home. It seemed a bit strange to me when I got back but I soon got into work again and I quite enjoyed myself at home and looking to another one shortly.*

*I don't think we will ever see the front. They are taking a lot of men out of the Army to make ammunition and they are letting A [Company] go to reap in the harvest so I may get a chance to and help. I don't know how long the war is going to last. It's looking very promising just now, I don't think it will last much longer. I hope not as I will be glad when it is all over. I was surprised to hear that Ralph has not been home. That's a pity for aunt but she may see him in England. I may see them also. We are not moving yet as about one hundred of our men are in hospital and we can't go til they are better but are quite well here. We have been very busy this week with one thing and another but we (must) do a bit more for a time. I will come again and must ask you to (give) my love to Mrs Gregg, Mr Jones, dear Beatie, Dear Alsie, Francis, Edward and the dear little children. Thank you for the cake which I very much enjoyed and now I am sending you the brooch hoping you will like it.*

*Now close with love to you dear mother and Father, also aunt Flo, Uncle Fred and family. xxxxxxxxx*

*Private C. Bichard, A Coy, 7 Wilts, PO 9, Camp, Sutton Veney, Wilts.'*

Cecil Reuben Charles Bichard was the son of Thomas and Mary Jane Bichard of 17, Piette Road, St Peter Port, Guernsey. The 1901 Channel Islands census shows him living at 2, Orange Villas, La Piette along with his parents, his sisters Beatrice aged 12 years old and Elsie aged 8 years old, plus brother Francis aged 4 years old. Ten years later the family were living in the Bouet area of St Peter Port, but Beatrice was no longer living at home. Elsie was a domestic servant, while Cecil's occupation merely says 'general' which probably means that he was a general labourer. His father was a market gardener.

When war broke out in 1914, Cecil volunteered to join the Wiltshire Regiment. He went to France with them in September, 1915, so this letter must have been written before then as he says he doesn't think he will ever get to the Front, and his address is Sutton Veny camp in Wiltshire. He was with 'A' Company, 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the Wiltshire Regiment whose records show that they were formed at Devizes in September, 1914 as part of Kitchener's New Army, becoming part of 79<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 26<sup>th</sup> Division (**Editor:** I was going to use a picture of the Divisional badge here, but it was a simple black cloth band that went around the epaulettes, very dull!).

They had moved, first to Codford and then into billets at Marlborough before going to Sutton Veny in April, 1915, from where Private Bichard sent his letter at some stage before they moved to France in September of that year. The letter must have been written not long before they left as he mentions some men being sent to help with the harvest which wouldn't have been earlier than August of that year.

If the photograph of Cecil's Regiment on the next page (courtesy of Valerie Sarre) is compared with modern photographs of the area it would appear that it was taken at Sutton Veny at about this time as the trees are in full leaf.



Cecil's Battalion moved to Salonika in November, 1915, where they were involved in the Battles of Horseshoe Hill and Doiran, returning to France on the 1<sup>st</sup> July, 1918. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of that month they were transferred to the 150<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 50<sup>th</sup> (Northumbrian) Division. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> October they took up a

position near Épehy, in the Somme area. They attacked the following day taking 152 prisoners. A further attack, a few days later on the 6<sup>th</sup> was unsuccessful as the Battalion were held up by barbed wire and sustained casualties of 5 officers and 217 other ranks. They later attacked at Le Cateau where the Battalion was awarded 21 Military Medals for bravery in the field. On the 7<sup>th</sup> November they took part in the final attack advancing near Landrecies and were successful in taking all their objectives. They established bridgeheads across the River Sambre and when the Armistice was signed they were south of Maubeuge. The Battalion was finally disbanded in June, 1919.

Private Bichard survived three years at the various Fronts, despite thinking initially that he would never see action. However he died of wounds on the 19<sup>th</sup> October, 1918, less than a month before the Armistice, at the age of 23 years. He is buried at Roisel Communal Cemetery Extension on the Somme in France. Roisel Communal Cemetery Extension was developed in October and November, 1918, by the 41<sup>st</sup>, 48<sup>th</sup>, 53<sup>rd</sup> and 58<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearing Stations (CCS). As Private Bichard died of wounds it is likely that he had been taken from the battlefield to one of those CCS. The 19<sup>th</sup> October was the date when the Battalion came out of the line, following a major attack on the previous day. The Battalion's Casualty Lists show that during the period from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> October, 1918 there were 6 Officers and 99 Other Ranks killed or wounded. Cecil Bichard must have been one of these men.