

THE BLEASDALE FALLEN OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

LIEUTENANT  
**JOHN BOURN**

1892 – 1917

**1<sup>ST</sup> BATTALION NORTH STAFFORDSHIRE REGIMENT**  
**72<sup>ND</sup> BRIGADE, 24<sup>TH</sup> DIVISION**



**KILLED IN ACTION 31<sup>ST</sup> JULY 1917**



**REMEMBERED WITH HONOUR**

## LIEUTENANT JOHN BOURN 1892 – 1917

**1<sup>st</sup> BATTALION North Staffordshire Regiment  
72<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 24<sup>th</sup> Division**



**John Bourn** was born in 1892, the son of John and Margaret Bourn who farmed at Lower Fairsnape. After John Bourn senior died in 1895 the family moved to Crow Trees, in Goosnargh. John attended Bleasdale School until 1904, but then left to go to Ellesmere College, Shropshire and Keble College, Oxford, before moving on to Egerton Hall Theological College, Manchester University, to train for the Church of England ministry. He became an officer in the 1<sup>st</sup> battalion, North Staffordshire Regiment and was killed at the on 31<sup>st</sup> July 1917, the first day of the Battle of Passchendaele. He was 25 years old.

### FAMILY BACKGROUND

**John Bourn** was born on 4<sup>th</sup> July 1892. He was the son of John Bourn and his second wife, Margaret. They farmed at Lower Fairsnape, Bleasdale. John's brother, William, was born the following year. John was only three when his father died, on 23<sup>rd</sup> December, 1895 at the age of 48. He was buried in St. Eadmer's Churchyard.

By 1901 the family had moved to Crow Trees, Goosnargh, close to Bleasdale, where Margaret lived with her two sons. She continued to farm. She was assisted by her brother, Isaac Hodgson and her widowed sister, Elizabeth Parker as well as a farm servant, Robert C. Orr. Isaac died at the farm in 1910, but Elizabeth was still at Crow Trees in 1911. By this time, Margaret's younger son, William, now 17, was working on the farm with Robert Orr, aged 33, now calling himself a 'farm manager'. She remained at Crow Trees until her death in 1942, aged 84. Her executor was William Bourn, farmer, presumably her son. Her effects amounted to £336 5s. 9d (27 ½ p.) which suggests she was not wealthy. However, she had been able to send her older son, John, to a fee-paying school and then University.

It may be that her brother's death provided the answer. On his death in 1910, his effects came to £223 4s. 3d. (£223 22½p.). Did this money pay for John's education? Margaret sent John to Ellesmere College, Shropshire, a Church of England boarding school. Although at 21 guineas per term the fees (1880's figure) were not high for the time, she was able to afford to continue his education at Oxford and Manchester Universities.

### SCHOOL, UNIVERSITY AND THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE

John Bourn attended Bleasdale School under the headteacher, Mr. Hesmondhalgh. There is no reference to his abilities in the '3R's' but in the autumn term of 1901 he gained first prize in the 'Collection of Wild Flowers, pressed and mounted' competition as well as being commended for high attendance. On 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 1904 he left Bleasdale School to go to St. Oswald's College (Lower Middle School) at Ellesmere, Shropshire (now Ellesmere College).

John left Ellesmere College in the summer of 1911 and entered Keble College, Oxford University, another Church of England foundation, opened in 1870, where he gained a B.A. degree. Here he was a member of the University Contingent of the Officers' Training Corps.

He entered Egerton Hall Theological College, part of Manchester University, in order to train to be a clergyman, and again joined the Officers' Training Corps, from October 1914 to January 1915.

## **ENLISTMENT**

Karen Macaulay writes:

*'On leaving the OTC he was commissioned second lieutenant in early 1915 into the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion North Staffordshire Regiment. He was then 22 years of age and his medical details dated 16<sup>th</sup> January show that he was 5 ft 9 inches tall and weighed 9 stone 10 lbs.'*

The Preston Guardian published a 'Roll of Honour' for Bleasdale on 13<sup>th</sup> February 1915, showing the men who had joined up to that date. After noting John's appointment to the 8<sup>th</sup> North Staffordshires, the report noted that he was quartered at Stirling for special training, although there is no record of what this consisted.

## **ACTIVE SERVICE IN FRANCE; PASSCHENDAELE**

Karen Macaulay continues:

*'He was promoted to Lieutenant on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1916 and arrived on the Western Front on 25<sup>th</sup> August 1916, joining the 8<sup>th</sup> North Staffordshire Regiment who had been at the Front since July 1915. At some point he was transferred to the 1<sup>st</sup> Staffordshires.'*

*'The 1<sup>st</sup> North Staffs was part of 24<sup>th</sup> Division and took part on the first day of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battle of Ypres (which later became known as Passchendaele). This began on 31<sup>st</sup> July 1917 and John Bourn was to lose his life on this day.'*

*'The Division was to form a defensive flank for the main assault, and the battalion objective was to capture the German front and second line trenches and the remains of Bulgar Wood.' These two trenches were called 'Jehovah' and 'Jordan' trenches, 1000 and 1500 yards respectively from the British front line.*

*'Prior to the offensive the battalion had been at Seninghem, where it had been practising for the attack for three weeks. On the night of 29<sup>th</sup> July they marched from here to trenches just south of the Menin-Ypres Railway, remaining here all of the next day. On the night of 30<sup>th</sup> /31<sup>st</sup>, B C and D Companies (John being in B Company), moved to the assembly positions in front of the Mount Sorrel system. Zero hour was 3.50 a.m. on the morning of 31<sup>st</sup> July and at first the attack went well, both the trenches allotted as the battalion objectives being captured. However, the enemy opened a very heavy enfilade fire with machine guns from positions at Shrewsbury Forest on the left and Bulgar Wood in front of the battalion. The war diary reported 'a great many casualties, especially amongst the officers' who, with the exception of two were all killed or wounded by 5.30 a.m. Casualties for this day were recorded in the war diary as 11 officers killed, wounded or missing: 42 other ranks killed, 239 wounded and 21 missing, believed killed. John Bourn was one of the officers killed on this day.'*

John's Commanding Officer wrote to his mother to explain that John was leading his men into an advanced position when he was shot through the chest by a machine gun bullet and died instantly. He was buried where he fell, but the grave must have disappeared as he is commemorated among the 'missing' on the Menin Gate.

## **AFTERMATH OF JOHN'S DEATH**

Margaret Bourn received a letter from John's C.O. not only describing the circumstances of his death but also saying that he had been a most gallant and capable officer, which may have been some comfort to her.

On Sunday, 19<sup>th</sup> August a memorial service for John was held at St Eadmer's, conducted by the Vicar, Rev. J.H.F. Parker. The church was crowded. The Preston Guardian reported the Vicar's words:

The Vicar spoke feelingly of the loss sustained and described the dead officer as a consistent and loyal churchman. He was of a kindly and genial disposition and was as much a friend as an officer to his men.

The War Office sent a total of £114 17s 10d owing to him at his death to his mother.

His is commemorated on the Menin Gate, Ypres, and on the Bleasdale, Whitechapel and Ellesmere College, Keble College and Manchester University War Memorials. His name is also on the Bourn family grave in Bleasdale Churchyard.

After the war, the anniversary of the attack in which he was killed became the North Staffordshire Regiment's main Regimental Day.

John was awarded the Victory and British Medals.



The British and Victory Medals

### **References:**

The Preston Guardian (microfilm, Community History Library, Harris Library, Preston):  
13<sup>th</sup> February 1915; 18<sup>th</sup> August 1917 and 25<sup>th</sup> August 1917.

For other references etc., see the Acknowledgement Page.