

THE BLEASDALE FALLEN OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

LANCE CORPORAL
JOHN CRAGG

1893 – 1916

1ST BATTALION LOYAL NORTH LANCASHIRE REGIMENT
2ND BRIGADE, 1ST DIVISION

ARMY NUMBER: 19002



KILLED IN ACTION 15TH JULY 1916



REMEMBERED WITH HONOUR

LANCE CORPORAL JOHN CRAGG 1893 – 1916
1st Battalion Loyal North Lancashire Regiment
2nd Brigade, 1st Division
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John Cragg was born at Caton in 1893. When War broke out in August 1914, he was working as a farm in the Bleasdale area. He and three fellow farm workers soon went to Garstang to enlist in the Army. Only one of them returned home. They probably all fought and survived the Battle of Loos in September 1915, and in the following year took part in the Battle of the Somme which started on 1st July. John Cragg was the first of the four to be killed, on 15th July 1916. He was 23 years old.

FAMILY BACKGROUND AND UPBRINGING



John Cragg was born at Caton in 1893, the third child of William and Mary Cragg. Eventually he was one of 8 children, all of whom were alive in 1911. His grandfather, James Cragg had kept a grocer's shop in Caton for many years. His father was apprenticed to a millwright and later worked all his working life as a fitter, mechanic or engineer in one of the cotton mills in the area. The family do not appear to have been prosperous in the early years. In 1901, when

John was 8 years old, his parents and the 6 children lived in a 4 roomed house at 2 Wesley Row, Caton. However, in 1911, after John had left home, his parents and their 7 children had upgraded to 'Ashleigh', a 5 roomed house with slightly more space. By then four of the children were working in either a cotton or a bobbin mill.

By August, 1916, William and Mary Cragg had moved to 14, Gregson Road, Lancaster, perhaps after William had started a new job in one of the mills along the Lancaster Canal. Here they heard the sad news that their son had been killed at the Battle of the Somme. Just over two months later, their son Harry was also killed in action.

John attended the National School, Caton, which was at Brookhouse, about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile away from his home.

WORKING AS A FARM LABOURER

When he was old enough to leave school, John decided not to go into a mill like most of the rest of his family but to work on the land instead. In 1911, he was working as a farm labourer for Richard Harrison and his son, cattle dealers and farmers at Carus House, Arkholme. He left there and by 1914, he had moved to Lower Core at Bleasdale/Chipping, working for Mr. Mercer. Did he obtain his work by personal contact or did he have to stand at the Hiring Fair?

ENLISTMENT AND EARLY DAYS AT THE FRONT

He enlisted in late 1914 at the same time as John Shaw and Lucien Farrar (both killed in action) and Thomas George Parker, who returned. Lucien Farrar and John Shaw were like himself, living away from home, working as farm labourers in the Bleasdale area, whilst Thomas George Parker's father was a local farmer. Their decision to join the Army also gives us an insight into the social lives of these young men who must have met together and planned to go on what in Autumn 1914 might have seemed to them an adventure. They all went to Garstang where they must have queued together to enlist at the Recruiting Office at Bowgreave as they received consecutive army numbers. John Cragg was the first to sign up as he was given the first one – was he perhaps the leader of the group? His promotion to Lance Corporal suggests he had leadership qualities.

They were all posted to the 1st Battalion, Loyal North Lancashire Regiment. This was one of the Regiment's regular battalions which had been in action in France since August, and owing to the large numbers of casualties it had suffered in the first few months was in need of replacements.

After training, the four went out to France together, arriving on 3rd June 1915. John and Lucien, if not the other two, took part in the Battle of Loos in September 1915. As his obituary says, 'John went through the fierce fighting at Loos without a scratch', but Lucien was wounded. Nothing is known about John Shaw and Thomas Parker in this battle. The battalion remained in the area around Loos (near Bethune) until the following Spring. John and John Shaw were both given leave in April and returned home together, seeing their families for the last time.

THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME

In July 1916, John Shaw and Lucien Farrar, and possibly Thomas George Parker, fought alongside John Cragg during the first month of the Battle of the Somme.

Karen Macaulay writes:

'The battalion was moved to the Somme in early summer 1916 in preparation for the forthcoming offensive which was to begin on the 1st July. By 7 a.m. the battalion has taken up position on the western edge of Bazentin-le-Petit Wood. At 11.30 a.m. orders were received for 'A' and 'B' Companies to move up at once and take part in an attack being made by the 1st Brigade on the German second line system north west of Bazentin-le-Petit Wood. The attack opened at 2.30 p.m. and the battalion captured and consolidated 500 yards of the German support line. At about 6 p.m. C Company was sent up to support the attack. Casualties for 14th July were 2 officers and 50 other ranks. John's friend Lucien Farrar was wounded for the second time during this attack.

'At about 7.15 a.m. on 15th July, orders were received to carry on the attack at 9 a.m. and bomb 1200 yards of trench to a point just east of Pozieres. Good progress was made in the early stages, 150 yards of support and 400 yards of front line being quickly captured. At both these points further advance was held up by machine gun fire and 'D' Company was sent in to support the attack. By 11 a.m. it had become obvious that further advance was impossible and the battalion began to consolidate the captured line. At 12 noon a strong counter attack was launched by the Germans against the support line and the battalion was driven back about 150 yards but almost immediately regained the ground. However, British artillery had begun to shell the positions and the battalion was forced to evacuate a portion of these trenches, several men being killed and wounded by our own shellfire.

‘Battalion casualties for 15th July were 4 officers and 174 other ranks. John Cragg was one of these casualties, killed in action on 15th July. He was 23.’

AFTERMATH OF JOHN’S DEATH

Some details about John emerge from the report of his death published in the Lancaster Guardian of 5th August. He wrote regularly to his parents, his last letter being written on 13th July, two days before he was killed. The parents first received the news of his death, not from the War Office but from a fellow soldier, Private Bevan. The War Office’s letter came four days later.

Private Bevan wrote a letter to his parents on 25th August which they received on the 29th. It seems that his body was recovered, and given a proper burial. Bevan said:

‘We made a nice cross to put over him. All speak well of him while he has been out here.’

He referred to ‘two young fellows who have mated with him – Shaw and Parkinson’, who appear to have known his home address, but wanted Bevan to write the letter as it was he who had buried John. Was ‘Parkinson’ a mistake for ‘Parker’?

Tragedy struck a second time for the Cragg family. John’s younger brother, Harry, was killed at the Somme two months later. This time they did not even have the consolation of a burial, as Harry’s name is on the Thiepval Memorial, where the missing are commemorated. A third son, James, who was an engineer on a transport, survived the War. More details of the brothers can be found at <http://lancasterwarmemorials.org.uk/memorials/caton.htm>.

He may have had a sweetheart, a Miss Ethel Sanderson. The War Office sent the money it owed him, totalling £12 9s 10d. to Miss Ethel Sanderson, the sole legatee of his will. So far she has not been traced.

His body was recovered and was reburied at Flatiron Copse, Mametz, Somme, grave X.K.B. He is commemorated on the Bleasdale War memorial and he and his brother also appear on the memorial at Caton.

John was awarded the Victory and British War medals and the 1915 Star.



British and Victory Medals and the 1915 Star

References:

The Preston Guardian 13th February 1915 (microfilm, Community History Library, Harris Library, Preston).

The Lancaster Guardian 5th August 1916 (microfilm, Community History Library, Lancaster).

For other references etc., see the Acknowledgement Page.