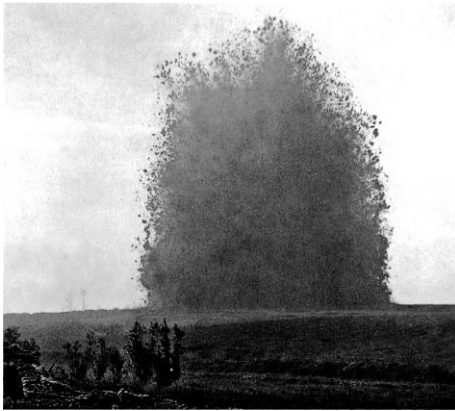


Centenary of the First Day on the Somme

At 7.30 a.m. on Saturday 1st July 1916, along a front of about 18 miles the men of the British divisions selected for the attack clambered out of their trenches and started across No Man's Land towards the German wire. Ten minutes earlier, a huge mine had been set off under Hawthorn Ridge near Beaumont Hamel giving the German artillerymen and machine gunners more than enough time to bring their guns into action.



The mine at Hawthorn Ridge 1st July 1916 By Ernest Brooks - This is photograph Q 754 from the collections of the Imperial War Museums (collection no. 1900-09), Public Domain,

Hatfield lost three of its boys on that first day.

Pte. Vincent J. Austin of the London Rifle Brigade 5th Bn. (City Regiment). He was an only son, living with his parents and sister at Vine cottage (by the 2nd Right of way and the Common) New Town. Vincent was a pupil at the Hatfield Collegiate Schools, Dagmar House. A memorial to the pupils that died in the Great War is in St Etheldreda's Church. Vincent was killed at Gommecourt, which was on the northern part of the Allied line. Also killed at Gommecourt on that first day was **Pte. Gordon M. Panter** of the 1/14th London Regiment (London



Dagmar House School Memorial in St Etheldreda's Church

Scottish) at the time of his joining up he was living with his parents; his father was a railway clerk for the GNR. Both Vincent and Gordon at the time of their deaths were 19 years old.



The 1/14th London Regt (London Scottish). Marching to Gommecourt June 1916. © IWM.

Herts. Advertiser, 29.7.1916: Panter, & Austin News

Missing – Privates Gordon Panter of the London Scottish and Vincent Austin of the London Rifle Brigade have been notified as missing since July 1st. The former is the younger son of Mr A Panter of Beaconsfield Terrace and organist at Lemsford Church. The latter is the only son of Mr Vincent Austin, Vine Cottage Newtown, a member of the Hatfield Parish Council

Bishop's Hatfield Parish Magazine, September 1916: " *The Missing – Words cannot express how much warm feeling there is for the parents of the "missing", Mr. and Mrs. V. Austin, Mr and Mrs. Page, and Mr. and Mrs. Panter. One realises what the anxiety must be while waiting for the news. We pray with them that this longed-for news may soon come and that they may yet hear that their sons are safe and sound". From the length of time they were posted missing it is unlikely that their bodies were ever recovered.*

At Gommecourt, the two attacking divisions had suffered 6,769 casualties with the 56th Division suffering over 60% of the total. They had failed to take Gommecourt and they had failed to protect the northern wing of the offensive at Serre where the attack had been brief and bloody. The Gommecourt 'diversion' was a costly and fatally flawed failure for which 2,206 men paid the ultimate price.

The third Hatfield man who was killed on the first day was **Pte. Herbert Edward Freeman** of the 7th Bedfordshire Regiment, who was living and working with his family at Stanbourough Farm when he joined up. He was killed at Carnoy, which was around the centre of the Allied line. Herbert was 19 years old,



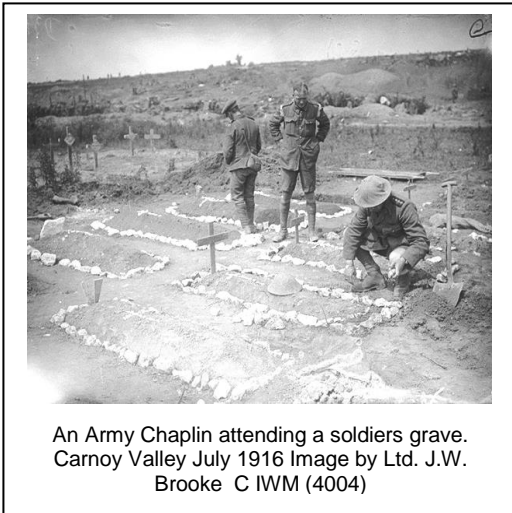
The somme © IWM

A copy of the letter sent to Herbert's parents and published in the **Bishops Hatfield Parish Magazine September 1916.**

B.E.F., France, 24-7-16,

"Dear Mrs. Freeman. I have received your letter of the 20th inst., and regret I can only confirm the news of your son's death, as reported by the War Office. He was killed by a bullet in the attack on the German trenches on the 1st July, death being instantaneous. He was buried with a number of his comrades on the battlefield, about half a mile north west of Carnoy, which is a little village about four miles east of Albert, his name being written on the cross over the grave. All his private possessions have been forwarded to the base, and should reach you in due course. Your son, Private Freeman, was one of the most useful members of my Company, and has on several occasions done most excellent patrol work during the winter. It may be some consolation to you to know that he died most gloriously in the foremost of the attack, which commenced on the 1st, and which our Battalion had the honour to lead. Please accept the sincerest sympathy of the Officers of his Company, and myself in your sad loss.

Yours truly, A. E. PERCIVAL, Captain."



By the end of a day of carnage unprecedented in the history of the British Army, 19,240 men had been killed, 2,152 were missing and another 35,593 were wounded; a total of 57,740 casualties in not much more than twelve hours of fighting. Across two thirds of the length of the British front what was left of the attacking units were back in their trenches. Only in the south, where the Germans did not expect an attack by the French, were the attacking troops on their first day objectives.

Another Hatfield man, **Corporal William Nobbs** not only survived the Somme but also the War, wrote the following letter home (West Lodge, London Rd.) Part of which was published in the Bishops Hatfield Parish Magazine.

23rd July 1916

" At last I am able to write you a letter, I expect you wonder what has become of me all this time. Well, I am glad to say I am still alright, although we have had rather a rough time lately. We have been in a hot corner and suffered very heavy too. . . . We were just where the fighting was hottest. First of all we were in support, for two or three attacks, and they gave us something for it, and we lost scores of men. We finished up our job by attacking the Huns ourselves, and we gave them all they wanted although it was a hard job that we had to do. We had a big piece of ground to advance over with German Machine guns and rifles firing all the time but with taking advantage of every bit of cover we could get, we got to the German line and drove them out of it, but after that they held us up a bit; we had another go at them at night to try to take a village. We got to the edge of it and then their fire was a bit too warm for us but we hung on until we were relieved. It was rather a stiff job going over twice in one day, but still we managed it. Our casualties were heavy as throughout the time we were in we lost over 400 men. Did you hear that George and Ted Hemmings were both wounded, also Jack Warner. Percy Canham has gone into hospital with some complaint or other, I believe. I was glad to hear you were all better at home again and that Dad had started work. There will be no need to worry about me for a time as we are out of the trenches for a rest, and are some distance from the firing line, in fact we can only just hear the guns. . . . I received parcel quite safe the other day many thanks for same, it came very acceptable as we were very short at the time and had had no bread for 3 days. Did I tell you I am in charge of two guns and twelve men now? Had rather bad luck in one attack lost eight out of twelve, so you can guess it was pretty warm. Sorry to say a pal of mine was killed after winning the Military Medal; I miss him very much as he was a nice chap."

Corporal W. V. Nobbs, Lewis Gun Section 6th Beds.

Derek Martindale 27/04/2016