

Chapter 34

Austin Plant: World War I casualty

May 2007. One of a series of Chapters by Dr. John S. Plant, Keele University, England, ST5 5BG.

SOME EXTRACTS FROM AUSTIN'S NOTEBOOKS ETC.

This account was initially compiled in 1990 by Austin's nephew, John Stewart Plant, and was based on Austin's personal effects, prefixed with some general information about the war. Subsequently, in 2007, the dated entries in particular were supplemented by information from the Official History of Austin's Regiment; that information was supplied by his niece, Diane Mary Marshall.

34.1 The Great War

Perhaps the most famous words written about The Great War were by the poet Siegfried Sassoon:-

*I died in hell -
(They called it Passchendaele); my wound was slight,
And I was hobbling back, and then a shell
Burst slick upon the duck-boards; so I fell
Into the bottomless mud, and lost the light.*

34.1.1 Historical context of Austin's actions

The Great War, now generally considered to have been the worst to have taken place in Europe, was originally hoped by the British at home to be only a short campaign of about six months. The British Expeditionary Force (volunteer army) was to help the French repel a German attack on the Western Front through neutral Belgium towards Paris.

1. Germany invaded Belgium and Britain declared war on 4 Aug 1914. Austin Plant enlisted shortly after on 3 Sep 14. By 1915 recruitment posters were rife.
2. Shortly after Austin's arrival in France, a Great Allied Offensive began on the Western Front, on 25 Sep 15. The Battle of Loos, at which Austin fought, was part of a wider three-pronged assault intended to drive the Germans out of northern France.
3. The Battle of the Somme (1 Jul - 18 Nov 16) was an Anglo-French offensive under Haig and saw the first (ineffectual) use of tanks in war, by the British on 15 Sep 16 at the start of the Battle of Flers-Courcelette (Somme). Austin was wounded on 29 Sep 16 at Martinpuich, which lies between the two villages, about 1 mile from Courcelette, 2 miles from Flers; it is 6 miles NE of Albert in the Somme; it is 4 miles beyond the British front line as it was delineated at the beginning of this (series of) battle(s) which marked the emergence of the British army into fighting on the European scale of major operations (Casualties: German 437,500; British 420,000; French 203,000).

4. Poperinghe in Belgium is mentioned in Austin's notes of 17 Oct 16 and 6-23 Aug 17; it is about 7 miles W of Ypres. Poison gas (chlorine) had been used for the first time successfully in war by the Germans at Ypres on 22 Apr 15 and mustard gas was used in 1917. Austin was killed on 10 Oct 17 at Hooze, which is on the Menin Road running eastward from Ypres, just north of the strategic high ridge that formed the southern flank of the eastwards advance into Passchendaele.

34.2 Austin's first Battle

The Battle of Loos¹, which began 25 Sep 15, was part of the first major offensive for some of Kitchener's New Army division. Haig was to assault on a seven-mile front between Loos and La Bassée. This was flat country covered in industrial workings, predominantly mines and their slag heaps. There were several heavily protected villages protected by deep belts of barbed wire; this was country the Germans would find easy to defend. Six divisions, some 75,000 men, were in the opening attack following a four day bombardment and the first British use of poison gas. Cavalry were to exploit the breakthrough. However, torrential rain the night before slowed the battalions' arrivals. In the morning the rain stopped and the breeze dropped but gas from 1,500 cylinders were still used. The attack was at 6:30 a.m. At the north end, the gas was blown back into British lines and the attack failed. At the south end, the gas was blown into the German lines, and German trenches and Loos town were taken; but the success could not be exploited quickly as three Divisions of reserves were held 5 miles behind the front lines, which were many hours of hard slog away through the heavy rain of the next night; and the reserves were not in place by the next morning, so the Germans counter-attacked and succeeded. Seven Victoria Crosses were earned on the first day. By mid-October, the battle petered out – 15,800 men were killed or missing, 34,580 wounded. The line had advanced 2 miles at the most. The village of Hulluch and Hill 70 were still in German hands.

34.3 Austin's final Battles

In 1917 there were serious mutinies in the French army and, to relieve the situation, Haig ordered an all-out attack with a stated eventual (phase 3) objective of cutting the German U-Boat rail transport link at Bruges, which is about 35 miles NE of Ypres. The ensuing Battles of Ypres in 1917 is often called 'Wipers 3' for there had been earlier battles in 1914 and 1915. Wipers 3 barely succeeded as far as the phase 1 objective of capturing Passchendaele only 6 miles NE of Ypres. The campaign was eventually described by Lloyd George as:-

the battle which, with the Somme and Verdun, will always rank as the most gigantic, tenacious, grim, futile and bloody fight ever waged in the history of war

In the initial action a 'gigantic system' (4 miles) of mines was exploded just beneath the German front line at 03:10am on 7 Jun 17; the explosion was heard in England. This marked the start of the Battle of Messines (7-14 Jun), after which there was a slow British advance until 31 Jul when 'Wipers 3' proper began with advances to the east by about 2 miles along a 12 mile front, taking the action by 4 Oct to within about 1 mile of Passchendaele whereafter the campaign came almost to a standstill in costly and bitter fighting in the swamps around Passchendaele; the intricate drainage system of the low ground around Ypres had been shattered by the long bombardment and the consequent overflow of streams, swollen by heavy rain, turned much of the battle area into a bog.

¹R. van Emden (2005) *Boy Soldiers of the Great War*.

The battles of 'Wipers 3'

Though there was much other fighting, the main officially-designated battles of the Battles of Ypres (1917) comprise:-

1. Battle of Pilckem: 31 Jul - 2 Aug
2. Battle of Langemarck: 16 - 18 Aug
3. Battle of the Menin Road: 20 - 25 Sep
4. Battle of Polygon Wood: 26 Sep - 3 Oct
5. Battle of Broodseinde: 4 Oct
6. Battle of Poelcappelle: 9 Oct
7. First Passchendaele: 12 Oct
8. Second Passchendaele: 26 Oct - 10 Nov

Austin appears to have been around Langemarck [27 Aug] shortly after the battle there [16-18 Aug]; then at the Battle of Menin Road [20-25 Aug]; and at Polygon Wood before his Division was relieved on October 8th only for him to be killed two days later.

Around Langemarck

The last entry in Austin Plant's notebooks was August 27th in which he mentions men working on a *light railway* and moving through ground *just taken* from German hands with numerous dead and decaying bodies. One may hence contend that Austin Plant *may have been* advancing through the general area of Langemarck.

Just before this (16-18 Aug) the Battle of Langemarck had taken place and Beatrix Brice records a *light railway* in that region in the following story taken from *The Battle Book of Ypres* first published in 1927:-

The 7th York and Lancaster Regiment² were sent into the area to open up railway communications between the backward and passable areas west of the Yser Canal³ and the area forward of Langemarck⁴. For months they had laboured night and day, until at length a circle of light railway was laid, and in operation, from Elverdinghe along the track of the old broad gauge, up to Langemarck; and back over the Steenbeek⁵, which had to be bridged in two places. The main line was the one on the site of the broad gauge, and the other had been made with the double objective of simple utility, and to mislead the enemy should he be led to inquire into the question of communication and supply. The main line must be kept a vital secret.

At Hooge on the Menin Road

Austin Plant is reported to have been killed instantly on 10 Oct by a shell at Hooge Crater. The tiny hamlet of Hooge, on the Menin Road, lies two and a half miles east of Ypres. Completely obliterated early in the war, it was looked upon as the worst section of the Ypres salient being continuously

²Contributed by an officer of the regiment.

³The Yser Canal passes almost north-south through Ypres.

⁴Langemarck is almost 3 miles E from the Yser Canal along a line 4 miles N of Ypres which passes N of Pilckem through Langemarck and then further by about 2 miles to Poelcappelle.

⁵The Steenbeek flows northwards towards Langemarck.

14 CHAPTER 34: AUSTIN PLANT: WORLD WAR I CASUALTY
subjected to shell-fire, machine gun fire and gas. The British cemetery at Hooge contains some 2,000 graves.

In Passchendaele: The Story behind the Tragic Victory of 1917 Philip Warner writes:-

There were battles around Hooge in 1915: the Château stood on slightly higher ground and the area was heavily garrisoned by German troops. The position was mined by the British troops and when it was blown up a huge crater was left. It became known as the Witches Cauldron, and as bodies fell or were flung into the water which soon filled it, the crater became indescribable.

and:-

Here the enemy were very close, but even closer were the dead of both sides, under their feet, half buried in the sides of trenches, lying in the slimy water in the shell holes, and constantly disturbed by shelling and digging. Even for the dead there was no peaceful resting place.

Black Watch Corner is a little over a mile to the east of Hooge, near Polygon Wood, and Beatrix Brice records an action (4 Oct 1917) that was almost contemporary with Austin Plant's death:-

By the time the attack was launched all indication of the route had been blasted away by the enemy's shells and the way between two deep morasses was one of infinite peril. What was left of the road was in full view of the enemy, and the advancing tanks were met by a hurricane of shells, rifle and machine gun bullets.

A little earlier, in the 'morale boosting' trench newspaper *The B.E.F. Times*, No 2, Vol 2 of Saturday 8 Sep 17, there had appeared a slightly more light-hearted account of the nearby Menin Road, through Hooge, under the heading *Seen from an Aid-Post*:-

There are many roads on Flanders, where the horses slide and fall,
There are roads of mud and pavé, that lead nowhere at all,
They are roads that finish at our trench; the Germans hold the rest.
But of all the roads in Flanders, there is one I know the best.
It's a great road, a straight road, a road that runs between
Two rows of broken poplars, that were young and strong and green.

You can trace it from old Poperinghe, through Vlamertinghe and Wipers;
(It's a focus for Hun whiz-bangs and a paradise for snipers)
Pass the solid Ramparts, and the muddy moat you're then in,
The road I want to sing about — the road, that leads to Menin.
It's a great road, a straight road, a road that runs between
Two rows of broken poplars, that were young and strong and green.

It's a road, that's cursed by smokers; for you dare not show a light;
It's a road, that's shunned by daytime; and is simply used by night,
But at dark the silent troops come up, and limbers bring their loads
Of ammunition to the guns, that guard the Salient's roads.
It's a great road, a straight road, a road that runs between
Two rows of broken poplars, that were young and strong and green.

And for hours and days together, I have listened to the sound
Of German shrapnel overhead, while I was underground
In a damp and cheerless cellar, continually trying
To dress the wounded warriors, while comforting the dying
On that muddy road, that bloody road, that road that runs between
Two rows of broken poplars, that were young and strong and green.



Figure 34.1: Austin Plant in (a) 1914 and (b) 1917

34.4 Austin's personal record

This record comprises extracts from Austin's contemporary letters home and, more especially, from two notebooks returned from his belongings. I have interspersed the dated entries with information from Colonel Willy's official history entitled 'The York and Lancaster Regiment', Vol. II which are labelled below [Y&L II].

The first section of Austin's first notebook contains various quotes, such as one dated Good Friday April 2nd 1915:

You can not dream yourself into a character. You must work hard and persiver. Above all put your trust in God.

This is then rewritten as:

You can not dream yourself into a character. You must hammer, and forge yourself one.

Another, apparently taken from the Daily Mirror of 16 Jul 15, is:

The dead do not need us; but for ever and for ever more we need them. **Garfield.**

Other parts of the notebooks contain such things as a list of family birthdays, drawings of horses with superimposed crosses, notes on human anatomy, gun drill and some French phrase translations. There are also diary-like entries which, along with a dated book, postcards, information from his personal file held by the MOD, etc., can be summarised as follows:

- **1906**

- Jul 31 [*Book 'The Innocents Abroad'*] Presented for Punctual Attendance at Meersbrook Bank School, Sheffield.

- **1914**

- Sep 3 [*Information from MOD*] Enlisted as Number 15861 into the York and Lancaster Regiment and posted to 8th Battalion⁶.
- Sep [*Y&L II*] 8th Y&L was part of the 70th Brigade of the 23rd Division; the 70th Brigade began to assemble at Frensham.
- Nov 11 [*Letter to his mother and sisters*] Under training; postmark is Frensham Common, which is about 4 miles NE of Bordon Camp, Hampshire.
- Dec 1 and 2 [*Y&L II*] 23rd Division moved from Frensham to Aldershot.

- **1915**

- Jan 14 [*Y&L II*] 70th Brigade inspected at Aldershot by Kitchener and the French War Minister.
- late Jan [*Y&L II*] Khaki uniforms issued.
- Feb, last week [*Y&L II*] Division moved to Shorncliffe area, Kent.
- Mar 15 [*Letter home*] At Hythe, Kent; visits Folkestone with other soldiers.
- Apr 2 [*At start of first notebook*] Austin Plant, Pte No 15861, B Company, Y & L Regiment. 58 North Rd, Hythe, Kent⁷.
- Apr 7 [*Postcard to his brother Tom*] From Kent.
- Apr 18 [*Letter to his mother and sisters*] At Hythe, Kent, under training including route marches; airship guarding coast.
- Apr 18 [*Birthday Postcard to his brother Tom*] Saying he 'was delighted to have another baby brother at the time'.
- Apr 26 [*Letter home*] Askcham House, Hythe; bathing feet in sea before morning parade.
- May 24 [*Y&L II*] Division move to Bordon; in hutments erected on the various commons.
- May 25 Arrived at Bordon Camp (Hampshire) after just 2 weeks stay at Bromley, Kent⁸.

- Jun 4 [*Letter to his brother Tom*] From St Lucia Barracks, Bordon, he asks Tom (aged 10) to keep drawing and sending him pictures.
- Jun [*Y&L II*] Service rifles issued to the Division; practice on Woolmer and Longmoor ranges.
- Jun 22 [*Letter home*] Now fully equipped; 20 mile route march with full packs for first time.

⁶This date is 1 month after war was declared.

⁷This address near Folkestone is later written again as that of a Mrs Rogers.

⁸Bromley, now an outer suburb of London, is about 50 miles from Hythe.

- Jul 14 Weds. Caught a 3ft snake whilst on manoeuvres on the moors close to White hill range.
- Jul 15 Four or five men got stuck waist-deep in a bog and had to be helped out.
- Jul 19 Made 7 o'clock orderly in Orderly Room.
- Jul 21 [*Letter home, probably written in previous week*] One of men had used a rifle to kill a 3ft snake on moorlands; recalls his leave home at Xmas 1914.
- Jul 21 [*Y&L II*] Firing, so no man allowed a pass for a week. Got identification medals that morning.
- Jul 28 Two vaccinations in left arm.
- Jul 30 Came home to Sheffield (28 Pearson Place, Meersbrook), arrived 2 a.m.
- Aug 3 'Visited Aunt Kates and Aunt Mays this morning'.
- Aug 5 Thurs. Got back to Bordon, midnight.
- Aug 16 [*Y&L II*] 23rd Division inspected by King on Hankley Common.
- Aug 18 Wed. Cleaning up all day for inspection.
- Aug 27 [*Y&L II*] 8th Y&L marched to Liphook and entrained for Folkestone, arrived Bologne in evening.
- Aug 27 [*Information from MOD*] Started Overseas Service in France (until his death on 10 Oct 1917).
- Aug 28 [*Y&L II*] Having spent the night at Ostrohove Rest Camp, the 8th Y&L marched to Pont-de-Briques, entrained at noon for Audriceq arriving at 3 p.m., then marched to Nielles-les-Ardes near St Omer where they were billeted in farm buildings.
- Sep 3 Billeted in an old farm in France, no blankets and short of food.
- Sep 7 [*Y&L II*] 23rd Division marched to the Borre-Vieux Berques area; this was a trying march due to the very great heat and its all being on the pavé.
- Sep 9 [*Y&L II*] 8th Y&L to front-line trenches beyond Erquingham for training by the Royal Irish Regiment.
- Sep 14 [*Y&L II*] 8th Y&L appear to have supplied a working party of 400 for the Division's trenches of c.4,500 yards from a point 300 yards south of the farm Grande Flamengie to the road from Armentieres to Wez Macquart.
- Sep 15 [*Letter home*] One of his platoon had drowned in a pond before he even went into the firing line. He had already seen a British plane bring down a German one and had been in trenches for 34 hours.
- Sep 17 Building a trench between German and British lines at night, perpetual German sniping; one R.E. shot through head and buried today.
- Sep 18 Left Reserve Trenches and went into firing line⁹.
- Sep 25 [*Y&L II*] Battle of Loos. After 4 days of artillery fire, the 8th Y&L were in support in the left section with the aim of capturing the German line between Corner Fort and Bridoux Fort. The German front line was indeed captured, and part of their second line, though by nightfall the 8th Y&L was back in the original trenches.
- Sep 30 [*Y&L II*] 23rd Division, to left of the lines, arriving about 8.30pm; 8th Y&L withdrawn to billets in the Rue Marle about 2 miles to the rear left of the lines.
- Oct 11 to 18 [*Y&L II*] 8th Y&L at Estaires.
- Oct 18 [*Y&L II*] 8th Y&L marched to Sailly. Part of Division reserve under training, by association with more experienced troops.

⁹This date coincides with the start of the Great Allied Offensive.

- Oct, late to Nov, early [*Y&L II*] 8th Y&L strengthening front-line trenches, preparing winter accommodation in and behind the lines and preparing for an attack similar to the Battle of Loos; but the proposed attack was abandoned after 48 hours of rain.
- Nov 24 [*Y&L III*] 8th Y&L marched to billets in and around Steenbecque; withdrawn to army reserve, under training.
- Dec 15 Left the trenches to stay at another barn in France for a rest.
- Dec 15 [*Letter to his brother Norman*] Not keen to get back to trenches.
- Dec 18 Company and Battalion drills in morning on bad, wet ground.

• 1916

- Jan 9 [*Y&L III*] The Division began to return to the Lys area, with his Brigade to the right of the Fleurbaix sector.
- Feb 4 [*Y&L III*] Tyneside Scottish troops sent to 8th Y&L for instruction in trenches.
- Feb 8 [*Y&L III*] 8th Y&L patrol, comprising 2nd Lt., sergeant and 7 men, discovered 3 enemy working parties. Several Mds bombs and rifle grenades were thrown ‘with apparently good effect’.
- Feb 9 [*Y&L III*] 8th Y&L patrol in hand-to-hand fighting. Germans killed. Lt Willets wounded.
- Mar 26 [*Y&L III*] The 8th Y&L marched in afternoon via Estairis, La Gorgue and Calernne; they were entrained for Longeau near Amiens; and marched to Vignacourt arriving the night of the 27th.
- Apr 4 [*Y&L III*] The Division was in the Le Boiselle-Thiepval sector overlooking the River Anere. The 8th Y&L were in brigade reserve in billets in Albert at first.
- Apr 7 Attached to 179th mine-laying Company, Royal Engineers.
- Apr 13 [*Letter home*] Working with Royal Engineers in France.
- Apr 28 Working with mine-laying Company at Albert, France¹⁰.
- Apr 30 Big bombardment on front at about 1.30 a.m., third one recently.
- May 7 Still working 8 hour shifts with 179th mine-laying Company.
- May 10 Expecting to return to his own Regiment and move from this part of line tomorrow.
- May, late [*Y&L III*] The 8th Y&L were in trenches in the left sub-sector of the 8th Division in front of Authuille Wood; German machine gunners were ‘very active’. For the next few weeks, they moved between the advanced trenches and reserve in Albert where an attack was practised over a flagged course.
- Jun 6 [*Y&L III*] The 8th Y&L were sent by train to Bruay. The Battalion was reinforced.
- Jun 17 [*Y&L III*] An 8th Y&L patrol, comprising 2nd Lt, sergeant and 6 men, suffered one killed and all the rest wounded in a bombing attack on 15 Germans.
- Jun 30 [*Y&L III*] 8th Y&L moved into position for attack, facing an exceptionally wide No-Man’s-Land beneath the southern spur of the German’s Thiepval Salient.
- Jul 1 [*Y&L III*] First Battle of the Somme. At 6:30am, the Allies’ guns delivered an intense bombardment; the enemy replied. There was heavy shelling of the 8th Y&L front-line trenches in the Nab but very few casualties. As the wind was unfavourable, smoke could not be liberated during the attack; but, at 7:30am, the first wave of 8th

¹⁰Albert in the Somme is near Amiens and was entirely destroyed by German artillery. It is now, with a population of 10,000, a centre for visiting the 1914-18 battlefields.

Y&L left the trenches maintaining perfect order, but they were met with exceptionally heavy fire from the front and both flanks. Most of the men were killed or wounded. The remaining waves were also mown down by machine guns before getting half-way to the German trenches. About 70 men reached the German front line, some eventually reached the third line where all were killed or taken prisoner – one returned. Almost all of those who were held up at the German front line were killed – three returned. Many Germans were killed in their trenches and when marching across the open to counter the attack. The 8th Y&L suffered heavy casualties – 90% killed, wounded or missing. Of 23 officers, 13 were killed and 5 wounded. Of the NCOs and men, 612 were killed or wounded or missing. In the evening, the few survivors were withdrawn to Long Valley, Millencourt.

- Jul 4 ‘Bat (h)as just been cut up’, moving down line, big advance on British Front.
- Jul 14 [Y&L II] The Brigade left the Bruay area, moving to Poulainville.
- Jul 17 [Y&L II] The Brigade moved to Pierregot and Miruaux.
- Jul 21 [Y&L II] Division marched to Baizieux Wood with the 8th Y&L probably being held in reserve.
- Aug 7 to 17 [Y&L II] 8th Y&L moved by way of Millencourt, La Vieille, Bresle, Franvilles, Frenchencourt, Longpré, Cocquerel and Metern to Steenwerck.
- Aug 17 to Sep 2 [Y&L II] 8th Y&L moved to Steenwerck; took over the front line and support trenches in the left sector until they were relieved on Sep 2.
- Sep 12 [Y&L II] 8th Y&L in Bresle in reserve corps; they supplied large stretcher carrying parties during the capture of Martinpuich¹¹.
- Sep 18 [Y&L II] 8th Y&L moved into trenches near Martinpuich. The Division pushed forward with varying success for the next few days.
- Sep 29 ‘Wounded at farm just to the right of Martenpuch on the 29th inst about 1 o’clock’.
- Sep 29 [Y&L II] Destremont Farm. The 8th Y&L made an infantry attack on the farm supported by divisional artillery. [This is apparently when Austin was wounded]. From about 6 a.m. on the 29th until 9:30 on Oct 2nd, they and a section of 70th Machine Gun Company held the farm. Of the 8th Y&L, 3 men were killed, and 2 officers and 14 men were wounded [one apparently being Austin].
- Sep 29 [Y&L II] Destremont Farm. Two previous attacks had failed. The 8th Y&L Captain Burlen’s Company were to attack the farm with a second Company in support. At 5:30am, the Company assembled at over 700 yards from the farm, moved forward in two waves 50 yards apart, under cover of an artillery barrage, to within 50 yards of the enemy lines. The artillery barrage ended; and immediately the Germans opened up intense fire with rifles and machine-guns. But it was too late. The 8th Y&L charged the position with loud cheers, killed a large number of Germans and drove the rest away in great disorder. One machine gun, a thousand bombs, many thousands of rounds of ammunition and a large number of rifles were captured. Heavy German artillery bombardment of the farm resulted in 3 platoons being withdrawn for safety. The farm was held by one platoon of the 8th Y&L and a section of the 70th Machine-Gun Company until they were relieved at 9:30am on Oct 2nd.
- Oct 2 [Notification from Infantry Record Office, York, dated Oct 20] Austin had been wounded in action (gunshot wound to head) and admitted to 5 General Hospital, Rouen on Oct 2nd. [It would seem that, following his wounding on Sep 29th, Austin did not reach hospital until Oct 2nd].

¹¹Martinpuich is about 1 mile beyond the British Front Line as had been delineated on 13 Sep 16.

- Oct 7 In Marquee, expecting to leave hospital today (following a ‘slight scalp wound’); fed up with war but thankful to have come through 13 months.
- Oct 7 [Y&L II] Le Sars. 8th Y&L were a reserve battalion to the 69th Brigade during the attack on Le Sars; 5 killed, 14 wounded, 2 missing.
- Oct 9 [Y&L II] 8th Y&L relieved and moved into camp in Lozenge Wood, Contalmaison. ‘With the Battle of Sars’ the 8th Y&L ‘had seen the last of the mud and slaughter of the Somme battlefields’.
- Oct 17 Arrived back with Regiment, now with A Company, at Poperinghe.
- Oct 18 [Y&L II] The Division reached Ypres in the evening and was placed in the Infantry Barracks. The Division held a front of 3,500 yards, commencing east of Zillebeke and left to the Ypres-Menin Road, 250 yards west of Hooze. The weather was fair, the trenches dry, but there was much raiding by both sides.
- Dec 3 [Y&L II] Two Lts and 50 other men from the ranks of the 8th Y&L, in three parties, went on a night raid on German trenches just to the north of Clonmel Copse. At 12:15am, the first party left to clear the wire; but the night was very still, the frozen ground pitted with shell holes and pools of water, and the enemy were alert. The party were fired on repeatedly. At 4:00am, a torpedo was fired clearing 15 yards of wire. The assault parties pushed through the gap. Six or seven Germans were killed, several wounded and the rest of their garrison dispersed. Of the 8th Y&L, two men were missing, believed killed; both Lts and 5 other ranks were wounded.
- Dec 9 [*Carte Postale to his brother Tom*] Christmas Greetings.
- Dec 25 [Y&L II] 8th Y&L had their second Christmas Day at the front, in the trenches at Ypres.
- Dec 31 [Y&L II] 8th Y&L at rest area at Winnipeg Camp, prior to weeks of training.

• 1917

- Feb, late [Y&L II] 8th Y&L moved by rail and route march to the Bollezeele and Tilques training areas, where they stayed for over 3 weeks.
- Mar 19 [Y&L II] 8th Y&L moved forward to Herzeele.
- Apr 2 [*Postcard photograph of himself to home*] Says he is ‘in the pink of condition’.
- Apr 6 [Y&L II] The Brigade started returning to the front line, taking over the Hill 60 sector, 2500 yards from Verbrandenmolen to Observatory Ridge, 50 to 150 yards from the German front line.
- Apr 8 [Y&L II] 8th Y&L relieved 19th London Regiment on Hill 60 sector.
- Apr 9 [Y&L II] 8th Y&L under intense German bombardment and attacked by a large German raiding party – 26 men killed, 2 officers injured, 77 NCOs and men wounded and 69 missing.
- Apr 18-21 [*Letter to his mother and father on B.E.F. notepaper*] At YMCA near front, inspected by Brigade General, congratulated on behaviour whilst holding trenches.
- Apr 21 - May 4 [*Letter to his mother and 3 sisters*] Refers to photo of himself and comrades taken during short rest. In trenches from 21 Apr, in the front line for 10 days, but then at a large farm a few miles behind the firing line. At ‘that do’ on Easter Monday, Goodwin was wounded and by now probably in Huddersfield, Ploughwright was presumed killed, the sergeant was awarded the DCM and only 5 men in the platoon survived.
- May 5 [*Letter home*] Sleeping in a barn in ‘a bit of a village’ a few miles behind the firing line.

- May 6 [*Letter to his brother Norman*] Says 'lost a good many old pals' on Easter Monday.
- May 9 [*Letter to his father*] Someone who had worked at the same firm (in Sheffield) as he had, who was also called Plant, had had to have his leg amputated after having been wounded on Easter Monday. Currently out of trenches, training.
- May 9 [*Letter to his mother*] Remembers her birthday (May 3) and recalls his brother Tom's birth (10 Apr 05).
- May 12 [*Y&L II*] After a week out of the trenches, the 8th Y&L returned to the front line in the Observatory Ridge-Hooge sector, and were preparing for a great offensive to free the Ypres Salient from enemy observation.
- May 31 On leave in Sheffield, 'two more days to go and then back to Belgium'.
- Jun 2 Left Sheffield Midland Railway Station 11.35 p.m.
- Jun 3 Derby. arr. London 6.00 a.m., arr. Folkestone midday, dep. Folkestone 6.00 p.m., arr. Boulogne rest camp 10.00 p.m.
- Jun 4 Dep. Boulogne 2.30 a.m., arr. Abeele rest camp 10.00 a.m., dep. Abeele 6.00 p.m., arr. rest camp 11.00 p.m.
- Jun 5 Arr. Y & L transport 10.00 a.m.
- Jun 6 Sent up the line on carrying party¹².
- Jun 7 [*Letter home*] Gives details (as in Jun 3 entry in notebook) of journey from England to France.
- Jun 7 [*Y&L II*] Battle of Messines, Ypres. The 8th Y&L were in the second phase; they suffered heavy casualties. They were successful but 300 were killed, wounded or missing. The 8th Y&L, particularly A Company (which Austin says he had joined in his notebook entry of 17 Oct 1916) suffered heavy casualties from artillery fire before and during their movement to their forward assembly position. A Company lost 3 officers and many NCOs and, as a result, became disorganised and missed direction. Captain Barlow, acting second-in-command of the 8th Y&L, went forward to lead the company to its target. The Company killed many Germans and took several prisoners. The Battle of Messines was described as the 'most complete and overwhelming success yet achieved in trench warfare'. On Jun 7, 7200 prisoners and 67 guns were captured. There was no serious German counter-attack; heavy German bombardment of the captured area, on Jun 9 and 10, failed.
- Jun 9 [*Y&L II*] 8th Y&L moved by lorry to camp near Busseboom.
- Jun 14 Out of trenches for short rest, expecting reinforcements.
- Jun 20 Billeted at a farm near Meteren¹³, on stretcher bearing course.
- Jun 24 [*Y&L II*] Division back to the front, in the Hill 60 sector.
- Jun 26 Sun. German aeroplane brought down.
- Jun 30 Holding trenches taken from the Germans in the last push (Jun 7)¹⁴; shell holes, mud and water, terrible smell of dead men and horses; staying with some R.A.M.C. chaps in an old German concrete dug out, which is being used as an Aid Post.

¹²This date coincides with the start of the Battle of Messines (7-14 Jun).

¹³Meteren is about 12 miles SW of Ypres.

¹⁴On 7 Jun much of the Messines Ridge was captured by the British in just one hour and forty minutes and, by midnight, they had advanced down the far side and also taken ground to the N as far as 'Hill 60'. The subsequent work was largely to consolidate this 'completely successful limited attack' brought about largely by exploding 4 miles of mines just beneath the German front line, on which work had been carried on for the previous year.

- Jul 1 Heavy attack from Germans just before dawn; up to knees in mud and water. He notes from letter to him that his brother Norman is to have his medical tomorrow, on the day after his birthday (his 19th): he hopes that he fails it¹⁵. Also, his sister Elsie (aged 14) is to go for an examination this month: he hopes that she passes¹⁶. In dug out, with sentry, by day and laid in open by night. Expecting to be relieved by K.O.Y.L.I. into reserve dug outs soon.
- Jul 2 Lot of casualties from German artillery attack just before dawn; several killed and a lot wounded in a party of R.E.'s and Infantry who were laying cable just behind British third line; much stretchering; been holding the same trench, called Compton Corner, for 5 days.
- Jul 4 Digging support trench at night¹⁷.
- Jul 5 Relieved by Durham's but got lost on way out.
- Jul 9 Still resting under canvass (Mickmack camp).
- Jul 10 Two men of M.G.C. Corp. killed, about 5 wounded, from 2 shells on camp; 'one fellow was blown up in the air'.
- Jul 12 On Hill 60¹⁸ last night, digging trench for cable.
- Jul 13 Arr. Steenvord¹⁹ 10.00 p.m., by train and 5 km. march.
- Jul 18 At Metern, training for S.B.
- Jul 18 [*Letter home*] Near to 8th Battalion pioneers of the Royal Sussex.
- Jul 22 [*Y&L III*] The Division was withdrawn to the Berthern area, for training in Wizernes and Meteren.
- Aug 3 [*Letter to his mother*] He expects that the bad weather will have affected the British advance.
- Aug 4 [*Letter home*] Still out of trenches.
- Aug 6 Left Metern, marched to Arques where stopped in tents for night, then to St. Omer, then about 8 km. to a little village near Watten, then up the line near Poperinghe.
- Aug 11 Resting under canvass near Proven.
- Aug 14 [*Letter home*] Still out of trenches.
- Aug 21 German aeroplanes over camp.
- Aug 23 Moved to tents on other side of Poperinghe from Proven.
- Aug 25 At Bond Ypres.
- Aug 27 Men working on light railway²⁰ in field were subjected to 4 bombs and machine gunning from low German aeroplane. Moved up the line into trenches amidst pouring

¹⁵Compulsory military service for single men aged 19-30 had been introduced for the first time in Britain on 10 Feb 1916.

¹⁶She later progressed to becoming a Headmistress.

¹⁷The period from 14 Jun to 31 Jul was one of slow British advance, such as by about 600 yards further down the far side of the Messines Ridge.

¹⁸Hill 60 is about 3.5 miles SE of Ypres and at the most northerly point of the 5 mile length of slightly high ground gained at the Battle of Messines, whereafter a further 6 miles of the ridge NE to Passchendaele formed a strategic southmost flank of the subsequent eastwards advance (Hooge, where he was later killed, is about 2 miles north of Hill 60 on the edge of this subsequently taken strategic ridge).

¹⁹Steenwerk is near the railway and about 4 miles SE of Meteren, which is about 12 miles SW of Ypres.

²⁰This may have been the supply line to Langemarck, or its dummy, as discussed in section 34.3. This suggests that, after being on the south flank at Messines and after his retreat for training at Meteren, he had returned to the front at a position 3 or 4 miles NE of Ypres, to where the centre of the action had then switched (Poelcappelle is about 5 miles NE of Ypres along the road to Roulers which passes through St Julien, which is about 2 miles south of Langemarck along the Steenbeek). Later still he was at Hooge, where he was killed; Hooge is about 3 miles south of St Julien, in a (largely destroyed) woodland area which had, by then, become the main focus of the battles of advance.

rain, shell holes, dead horses and men, horrid smells. Moved through remnants of a wood²¹ which has become razed to just a charred patch and has just been taken from German hands; tree stumps and numerous decaying bodies 'brave British Soldiers who have give...' (incomplete sentence, no more entries in notebook).

- Aug, late [Y&L II] Brigade had been moved to the front line beyond Busseboom. The 8th Y&L came under very heavy shell and rifle fire and were engaged in hand to hand fighting; 12 killed, 44 wounded, 2 missing.
- Aug 30/31 [Y&L II] 8th Y&L were relieved and withdrew to billets in Abeele.
- Sep 5 [Letter to his mother and 3 sisters] Had been out of trenches for 5 days. 'Fritey' planes were active 'the other week'. Whilst they were resting in a field about 7 planes came over and dropped 4 bombs quite near but no-one was hurt. He writes 'had a rather rough time of it, this last time in the trenches'. His friend was killed and, at the same time, he himself was hit in the leg but it did not go in and only caused a slight bruise; otherwise, it would have been 'a nice Blighty one' especially if he had been sent to hospital in Sheffield but 'No such luck'. Now billeted in a barn on a farm.
- Sep 18 [Y&L II] Brigade in Dickebusch area. The 8th Y&L supplied a raiding party of 50 men and took 24 German prisoners. At 6:00am, 2 officers and 50 other ranks of the 8th Y&L raided 300 yards into Inverness Copse. One of the 24 Germans drew a bomb from his box-respirator and flung it at a party of the 8th Y&L; he was killed 'for his treachery'. Of the 8th Y&L, 1 officer and 2 other ranks were wounded. Of the rest, 2 officers and 21 other ranks were killed; 2 officers and 48 other ranks were wounded.
- Sep 20 to 25 [Y&L II] Battle of Menin Road, started at 5:30 a.m. Of the 8th Y&L, 3 were killed and 4 wounded. On the 20th, one officer of the 8th Y&L and 90 other ranks carried rations from Bedford House to Tor Top. On the 21st, the 8th Y&L were still in Railway dug-outs. On the 22nd, Companies A, I and F of the 8th Y&L [Austin was in A] moved up to relieve the Australian's Met Guides at Clapham Junction; the relief was complete by 11:15pm. On the 25th, the 8th Y&L were relieved.
- Sep 30 [Y&L II] 8th Y&L in front line. 4 men were killed, an officer and 12 other ranks were wounded.
- Oct 1 [Y&L II] 8th Y&L under heavy bombardment and attack after attack. Around 5:30am to 5:45am, a barrage was directed at the front and support lines of the 8th Y&L. The barrage continued on the Tower-Battalion HQ-Inverness Copse area until 6:30pm. There were direct hits on a room in HQ and on two dug outs.
- Oct 2 [Y&L II] From the 30th Sep to that night, the 8th Y&L had: one officer and 8 men killed; one officer and 50 NCOs and men wounded; and 3 men gassed.
- Oct 3 [Y&L II] 8th Y&L moved to billets at Meteren.
- Oct 8 [Y&L II] The Division was relieved by the 7th Division in front of Polygon Wood.
- Oct 10 [Notification from Infantry Record Office, York, dated Nov 7] Austin reported killed in action in France on 10 Oct 1917.

• 1918

- Jan 3 [Letter from S.Walker(?), Lt, 8th Yorks and Lancaster, Italy] In reply to letter from Austin's father, he explains that Austin was killed whilst the battalion was on its way to the trenches, passing Brigade HQ at Hooge Crater (on the Menin Road, Ypres salient) when a shell hit him. He died instantaneously.

²¹The only known substantial wood in the general area of Langemarck was Kitchener Wood about 0.5 miles W of St Julien (this had been captured earlier on 1 Aug) though there may also have been other small copses. In the advance of 15 Aug (Battle of Langemarck) the gain was roughly 1 mile along a 10 mile strip NNW from just S of St Julien.

34.5 Names and Addresses

It is known that Austin Plant's grandfather, James Plant, died on 7 Apr 1904 at 44 Onslow Road Greystones Sheffield and left some of his daughters living in that district. In the 3 Aug 15 entry above, Austin visits both his Aunt Kate and Aunt May in the same morning. From such information, it is thought that the following names and addresses taken from the first notebook *might perhaps* be those of respectively his Aunt Kate, his Aunt May, and others.

- Acacia Villa, 28 Dover Road, Sheffield.
- Mr Whitfield, 68 Tullibardine Road, Endcliffe, Sheffield.
- Mrs J Findlow, 52 Cruise Road, Oakbrook Road, Sheffield.
- Mrs Blackwell, 6 Catherine Street, Pitsmore, Sheffield.

Certainly the first is believed, from family memories, to be the address of an Aunt who lived just below the Botanical Gardens. The second may (also) be the person who employed Austin and later his younger brother Norman (?); there is an entry dated 25 May 15 'Received a letter from Mr Whitfield, 68 Tullibardine'. Possibly related to the fourth, there is also written later (near the date 18 Dec 15):-

- Pte T W Blackwell 15836, 8th Y & L, 31 Ward Northumberland War Hospital Gosforth Newcastle on Tyne.

and the name Blackwell is also jotted down early on with other surnames and small sums of money (perhaps card playing debts) most crossed off.

There is an entry 15 Aug 15 'This morning wrote a letter to Mr Moore and one to Mr and Mrs Rowe' and, earlier, there is the address:-

- Mrs Rowe, 77 Newbury Road, Bromley, Kent.

which presumably relates to the stated visit to Bromley (*cf.* the item 25 May 15 above).

In addition, there is a postcard from Austin in Pontefract (undated) to his brother Tom (jnr) saying 'I did not find out there were no trains on Sunday until I went out to see if Norman was coming'. Also, there are two postcards from someone called 'Bert' in Belgium to Austin's father Tom (snr) dated Sep 1927, saying he would have a lot to say about his visits to Ypres and the battlefields when he got back.

34.6 From the Ministry of Defence

The following are extracts from a letter dated 1 Oct 1990 from the *Army Search Unit* of the *Ministry of Defence*.

- As mentioned in my letter of 14 September 1990 there are only a few documents in the file of the above-named, your Uncle, and those that do exist have been badly damaged by fire.
- Medals Awarded: 1914/15 Star; British War and Victory Medals.
- On attestation Private Plant declared that he was born 'in the Parish of Sheffield in or near the town of Sheffield in the county of Yorkshire'. It is difficult to read his trade on enlistment but it would appear to be *sawpiercer*. He gave his age as 20 years and 310 days²².

²²His date of birth was 9 Nov 1893 and his date of enlistment was 3 Sep 1914; this stated age would correspond to a date 15 Sep 1914.

- He gave his next of kin as his father Tom and his mother Rose Beatrice of 28 Pearson Place, Meersbrook.
- His brothers are listed as Norman aged 24 and Tom aged 14 and his sisters as Jessie aged 19, Beatrice aged 18, Elsie Mabel aged 16, Mary Winnifred aged 12 and ? Millicent aged 7²³.
- He is described as being 5 feet 7 1/2 inches tall, weighing 110 lbs with brown eyes, dark hair and a fair complexion.

²³With the exception of Norman, these ages could only be correct for a date lying between 20.8.1919 and 15.1.1920.