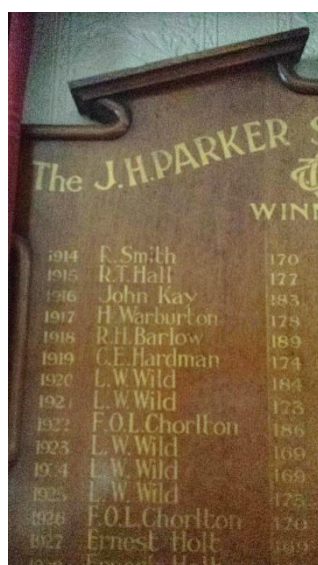


# **Bury Grammar School Centenary Roll of Honour** **Sergeant Roger Smith MM, 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion Manchester Regiment (1<sup>st</sup> Manchester Pals) died 15<sup>th</sup> October 1916 aged 26**



Roger Smith was born in Bury on March 17<sup>th</sup> 1890, the elder son of William Smith and his wife Annie. The family lived at 13 Monmouth Street Bury. William Smith was the works manager of a company producing paper making machinery. At that time Bury was one of the centres of British paper production. Roger and his brother Alec both attended Bury Grammar School. Roger joined the school in September 1904 and the next year became a founder member of Derby when the House system was introduced. He also belonged to the school's Cadet Corps, alongside his brother.



Roger left BGS in April 1906 and gained a job in the Ramsbottom branch of the Lancashire and Yorkshire Bank. He later moved to the larger Bury branch. He was a keen golfer and Honorary Secretary of Walmersley Golf Club. He was the first winner of their Parker Scratch Medal and his name can still be seen on the Honours Board of the club.

On 1<sup>st</sup> September 1914, together with his friend and fellow BGS old boy Hubert Dawson, he became one of the first to enlist in the Manchester Pals, joining 1<sup>st</sup> City Battalion, later officially the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion Manchester Regiment. The Pals Battalions were the brainchild of Lancashire aristocrat the Earl of Derby as a means of encouraging men from the same area and occupations to join up and serve together. Many BGS old boys heeded the call.

Roger Smith was originally a member of No VIII Platoon of B Company but eventually transferred to A Company alongside Hubert Dawson. After initially camping at Heaton Park, the battalion moved to Belton Park in Lincolnshire in April 1915 and then to the garrison town of Larkhill in Wiltshire in September. On 6<sup>th</sup> November 1915 they landed in France and were soon undertaking duties in the trenches, initially under the supervision of more experienced units.

Roger Smith was promoted to Corporal but asked to return to the rank of Private. On 10<sup>th</sup> May 1916 Captain Hubert Worthington, A Company's commander, wrote to Roger's parents:

*'You will be proud to hear that your son is the first man of his regiment to be recommended for the Military Medal. His name was sent forward today and though it lies with the authorities to pick and choose, we all hope the application made by the Colonel will receive the recognition it deserves. Your boy is so modest that I feel sure he will make light of it to you but I can assure you one and all are proud of him and eager to hear of the confirmation of the recommendation.'*



*'He escaped, providentially. There was a heavy bombardment of our front line trenches on the night of the 5<sup>th</sup> May. The post on which your son was sentry was unfortunately badly hit; four were killed outright and three wounded and it went down the line that your son was also hit but he remained pluckily at his post from 11 until 3-30 am - an ordeal to try the nerves - for the wreck was terrible. Three times I know myself and another officer tried to persuade him to be relieved but he insisted that he preferred to 'stick it' and remained until dawn and the trench had been cleared and repaired and the dead taken away. The following day a Lewis gun team was picked of men who could best stand the strain of manning a dangerous post after the ordeal of the previous night and your boy again volunteered. We all feel that in cold blood to do as he did after the shock of so great an artillery outburst takes greater courage than those acts of bravery performed in the open when the blood is up and there is the excitement of battle. I congratulate you, and particularly in your son's escape with his life'.*

The Military Medal was introduced in March 1916 as a counterpart to the Military Cross, which could only be awarded to officers. Roger Smith's award was subsequently confirmed. The officer who wrote the letter, John Hubert Worthington, was severely wounded during the Pals' successful attack on the village of Montauban on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916. He sheltered overnight in a shell hole and was rescued the next day. After the war he became one of Britain's leading architects and was knighted in 1949. He died in 1963. During that attack the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Manchester Pals advanced further than any other British units on that terrible day. Roger Smith's friend and fellow old boy, Hubert Dawson, chalked his name on a captured German field gun in the valley below Montauban. We know that Roger Smith was injured because of a reference in a letter written by Colour Sergeant Peter Darlington of A Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Pals to the wounded Captain Worthington:

*'Roger Smith is walking about with a wounded shoulder, would not go in Hospital for fear he should be sent to another battalion when better and there are many deeds which would have given you heaps of pride and pleasure. Briefly put, it is an honour to belong to the battalion.'*

A week after the Pals' success at Montauban, Roger's brother 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Alec Smith was killed while serving with 10<sup>th</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers a few miles away at Contalmaison. Roger Smith survived the battle at Guillemont on 30<sup>th</sup> July 1916 in which many of the original Pals became casualties. He was promoted to Sergeant. The battalion spent time recuperating in the Bethune sector but returned to the Somme in October. North east of High Wood on 15<sup>th</sup> October

1916, while he was once again manning an isolated post, the luck of this very brave man finally ran out. According to the battalion War Diary:

*'Sergeant 6683 Roger Smith of A Company was in a forward post with two other men. The Germans had been shelling the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion's positions for two hours. After the shelling stopped a party was sent out to check on the post. They found the remains of three men at the spot but could not positively identify them. They collected together what they could find and buried them'.*

The family was notified of his death by Roger's friend, Hubert Dawson. The Rev. R.W. Balleine, Chaplain to the Forces, sent the following letter, together with one to the Rev. R. P. Hudson, Vicar of St John's, Bury. (Rev. Hudson's son, Austin, another BGS old boy, was serving as an officer in the Lancashire Fusiliers and would be killed a year later in Belgium):

October 16<sup>th</sup> 1916

Dear Mr Smith,

*I cannot say with what sorrow I write to tell you of the death of your son Roger. He was killed early yesterday morning by a shell during a heavy bombardment of our trenches by the Germans. He was killed outright-an absolutely painless death. His body was buried close to where he fell. I was not in the trenches at the time but Major Elstob, who was in command of the battalion, read the burial service over his grave which we are having marked with a cross and registered. I know how little any words of sympathy can do to help you in your great loss., especially as I am told that this is the second son you have lost in a few weeks. But I can assure you that that his family are not alone in their sorrow at Roger's death. I wish that you could hear the way that in which both officers and men speak of him. He was justly loved and admired by all his comrades, straight, thorough and absolutely fearless. He developed into a magnificent and model soldier and his promotion would certainly not have stopped where it did. He was a marked man in the battalion and thoroughly deserved his popularity. I myself feel his loss keenly. From the time I prepared him for Confirmation last February, I had grown to be very fond of him. And had watched his progress with great hopes. May God give you strength and courage to bear this great blow that has come to you.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*R.W. Balleine CP.*

Wilfrith Elstob, the commander of the 16<sup>th</sup> Manchesters mentioned in the letter, was a schoolmaster before the war. Nicknamed 'Big Ben', he won a posthumous Victoria Cross for his heroic leadership of the battalion in the defence of Manchester Hill on 21<sup>st</sup> March 1918. It was he who would write a letter of condolence to the parents of Hubert Dawson when Roger's best friend and fellow BGS old boy was himself killed a few months later during the Battle of Arras.



**Rev. Robert Wilfred Balleine (1881-1951) and Wilfrith Elstob VC (1888-1918)**





**The location of Roger Smith's original burial north east of High Wood (Google Maps/ Munnin Project)**

Roger's isolated burial was subsequently relocated to Warlencourt British Cemetery, grave reference VIII.J.49. If the War Diary account is correct, it seems likely that the grave actually contains the remains of all three men killed by the German shell, but the burial return document lists only Roger Smith and his name alone appears on the headstone. The other two may be Privates Alfred Keegan and Fred Curry who died on the same day and are commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial. However, at this distance in time this mystery will probably never be solved.



**Warlencourt is the fifth largest Commonwealth war cemetery on the Somme, made up of isolated burials concentrated there after the war. (CWGC)**

Sources: Bury Grammar School Archives, UK Censuses, 'Bury Times', 'Bury Guardian', Contributors to the Manchester Regiment Forum, Museum of the Manchester Regiment, War Diary of the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion Manchester Regiment, CWGC, Munnin Project, 'Manchester Pals' by Michael Stedman.