

Bury Grammar School Centenary Roll of Honour
Gunner Arthur John (Jack) Benson, 79th Field Battery, Royal Garrison
Artillery, died 12th April 1917 aged 26.



The cap-badge of the Royal Garrison Artillery. No photograph of Jack Benson has so far been located.

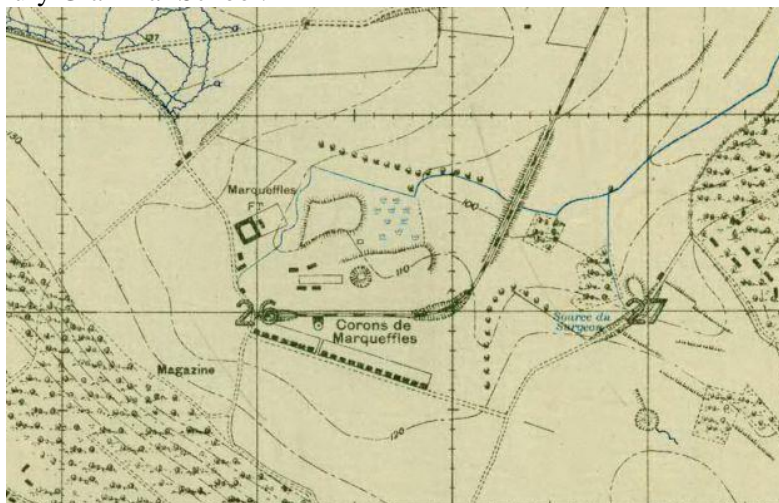
Arthur John Benson, known as Jack, was born on 5th April 1892, the son of Joseph Benson and his wife Mary of 84 Schofield Road in Rawtenstall. His father was the manager of a stone quarry. After attending Mr. Isaac's School, Jack joined class Lower VA of Bury Grammar School on 15th January 1907. His younger sister Annie Gertrude Benson joined the Girls' School at the same time. Jack Benson was a member of Derby House and is recorded as winning a commendation for Form Shooting at the Miniature Rifle Range as a member of Form Upper VB in the April 1908 edition of school magazine 'The Clavian'. He achieved a pass grade in the Oxford Local Examinations in 1908, alongside Ernest Belchamber who would also be killed during the Battle of Arras in April 1917 and John Lamburn, the brother of Richmal Crompton and the model for her immortal schoolboy character 'Just William'. He later gained Class II in the Lancashire and Cheshire Institutes' Examinations in Intermediate French in 1909. Jack left BGS in Form VIB on 22nd December 1909. He went to work with his father and by 1915 was an Assistant Foreman at Brooks and Brooks Quarry in Rawtenstall.

Jack Benson enlisted in the British Army in Manchester on 2nd November 1915. He was recorded as 5 feet 9 ³/₄ inches tall with grey eyes and fair hair. He arrived at No 2 Depot, Royal Garrison Artillery at Fort Brockhurst, Gosport in Hampshire on 5th November and was posted to the newly-formed 79th Siege Battery. Siege Batteries were equipped with heavy howitzers, which sent large calibre shells high into the air to deliver plunging fire onto enemy positions. Siege Batteries were most often employed in destroying or neutralising enemy artillery, as well as bombarding strongpoints, stores, roads and railways behind enemy lines. 79th Siege Battery was equipped with four 9.2 inch Howitzers in two sections code-named 'Andrew' and 'Anthony'. The 9.2 inch Howitzer weighed five tons and had to be transported in three sections. Mounted on a platform and cradle, the gun could fire shells up to 9,200 metres at a muzzle velocity of 362 metres per second. Each gun had a crew of four men.

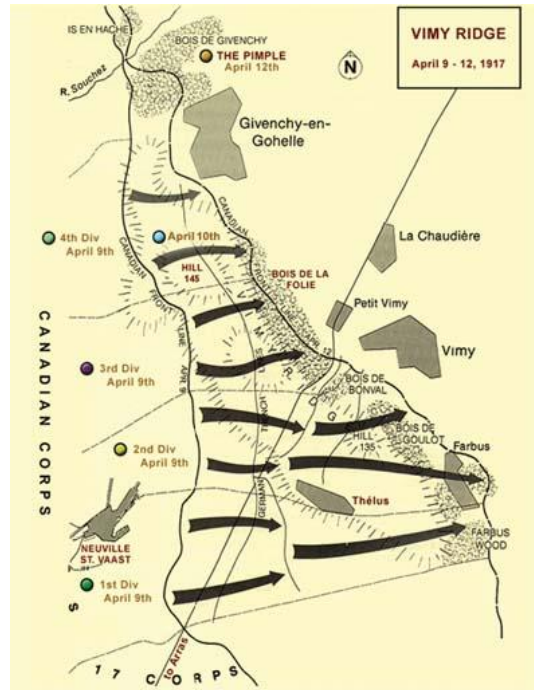


A Section of 9.2 inch howitzers in action on the Western Front ('The Long Long Trail' website)

79th Siege Battery embarked at Avonmouth on 27th April 1916, arriving at Boulogne the next day. Jack served with the battery throughout 1916 and the bad winter that followed. On 27th March 1917 the battery took up positions at Marqueffles Farm near the village of Bouvigny-Boyeffles, 17 kilometres north of the city of Arras. The battery took part in the massive bombardment of enemy positions and counter-battery fire against German artillery in the build-up to the attack on Vimy Ridge, which was to be undertaken by the Canadian Corps. This vital position was successfully captured on Easter Monday 9th April 1917, with the exception of an enemy strongpoint known as The Pimple. 79th Siege Battery continued its firing programme in support of the Canadians until The Pimple was finally taken on 12th April. The Battery War Diary reported that enemy retaliatory shellfire was much lighter on that day than was recorded on 9th April, but nevertheless two men were killed: 62651 Gunner (Acting Bombardier) Jack Benson and 38236 Corporal Samuel Pressley from Portsmouth. The capture of Vimy Ridge marked the start of the month long Battle of Arras, which would see the deaths of a further six former pupils of Bury Grammar School.



Part of a First World War trench map showing Marqueffles Farm, where Jack Benson was killed on 12th April 1917. The map below shows the location of The Pimple, captured with the aid of 79th Siege Battery's supporting fire that day.



Jack Benson is buried in Grave I.E.3 at Bully-Grenay Communal Cemetery, British extension, a few miles from where he was fatally wounded. His obituary in the 'Rossendale Free Press' says that he was '*well known in Rawtenstall*'. As well as the memorials at Bury Grammar School Jack Benson is also commemorated on the Rawtenstall Municipal War Memorial. His Army Service Record contains a memorandum that any articles of personal property should be despatched to Miss Emily Holden of 23 Whittle Street, Rawtenstall. We can surmise that this lady was Jack Benson's fiancée.



Bully-Grenay Communal Cemetery, British Extension (CWGC)

Sources: Bury Grammar School Archives; UK Censuses 1901 and 1911; Rawtenstall Library; 'Rossendale Free Press'; Rossendale family History Society; Contributors to the Great War Discussion Forum; 'The Long Long Trail' website, CWGC.