

The “*Boar’s Head*” –

A Forgotten Battle in the Shadow of the Somme

It was the big battles of the Great War, with their massed casualties, that have seared our collective memory. However, many local men fell while just holding the line, whether through shells, snipers or minor engagements not officially recognised as ‘Battles’. The ‘*Boar’s Head*’, of June 1916 was typical

The *Boar’s Head* in 1916 was a 200-yard-wide dent in the Western Front, shaped like a gargantuan pig’s snout. On the night of June 29th-30th it was decided to attack it to fool the Germans into thinking that a major offensive was brewing here - not on the Somme.

300 men of the *13th Gloucesters* followed up a night attack by digging a trench, the length of a football pitch, connecting the British and German lines, in the darkness. They dug amidst shell-bursts, through flooded dykes and barbed wire, while fighting off grenade attacks. The only light for direction finding was a torch beam.

The ‘*Tewkesbury Register*’ carried a report from local bricklayer and footballer, Tom Bassett: “*The lads when they returned from the fight were smothered in mud and dead tired from the struggle ... under the conditions of a perfect hell*”. However, Tom wrote that their friend, bricklayer Sgt. Tom Harrington, was missing. Despite “*each night since the attack men have been out to bring in the killed and wounded*”, Tom’s body was never found.

The attack was a failure and the trench abandoned with 86 *Gloucesters* casualties of a 900 total – more than our fallen of the Falklands and Iraq war combined. Sadly, the greater tragedy on the Somme means that few today are aware of the ‘*Boar’s Head*’.

Also killed in previous months were:

1. **Pte. Ernest Williams**, a reservist on 13 December by random shelling or sniper fire.
2. **Pte. C. H. Bailey** a volunteer “*resting*” after Loos, by a shell-burst on 19 December.
3. **Pte. Leonard Devereux**, a volunteer, on 2 March 1916 ; “*by a fragment of shrapnel*”
4. **Pte. William Hodges**, a veteran reservist, on 21 May: a “*Fair amount of shelling ... I killed*”.
5. **Pte. Tom Bishop** [*13th Gloucesters*], a volunteer, on 6 June: again while repairing trenches.

[Tom Bassett survived to live to a good age with a well-known provisions shop in 9 Church Street. It was only in 1936 that an operation to his ankle caused the retirement of this “*most prominent fast bowler and footballer*”. A year earlier he was lucky to survive an incendiary incident!]

