

GEORGE HOFFMEISTER

According to his christening record, George Bernard Hoffmeister was born in Alne on 22nd October 1884, and baptised at St. Mary's Church on 14th December that year. In his later records, however, his birthplace is always given as Tollerton. He was the third of six surviving children of the eight born to Alexander and Harriet Hoffmeister. Alexander was a silver refiner at the time of George's birth, although he had previously been a railway signalman and was later to become a gold refiner.

Prior to Alne and Tollerton the family had lived in Bolton Percy and Birtley – Harriet was born in Dunnington and they married in York – but at some point between George's birth and the 1891 census the family moved permanently to Edmonton in London. The 1901 census finds him living at home with his parents and working as a barrister's clerk, but between then and 1911 George decided to swap his clerical duties for those of a soldier. The census of that year records him as a Lance Corporal in the 4th Battalion Royal Fusiliers, living in Corunna Barracks, Stanhope Lines, Aldershot.

Unfortunately, there are very few records relating to George's military career, including the reason why by 1914 he had been demoted back down to the rank of private. As a member of the 4th Battalion, however, by the start of the war in 1914 he would have been based in Parkhurst on the Isle of Wight. The battalion was then sent to France as part of the British Expeditionary Force, landing at Le Havre on 13th August, with the Battle of Mons as its first engagement just ten days later. This was a fight to gain control over the bridges spanning La Haine river in the Belgian city, and resulted in a retreat by the British and French forces over the border into France. Their next engagement came on 26th August at Le Cateau-Cambresis when they lost around a fifth of their strength and were forced to withdraw as part of a tactical retreat by the whole Allied army on the Western Front which lasted nearly two weeks and covered 250 miles. The battalion next saw action on 6th September at the First Battle of the Marne, which was a hard-fought conflict spread over a wide area. The prize at stake was Paris itself, the fall of which would have signalled the defeat of the French and their withdrawal from fighting. Lasting four days, the Allied forces finally proved stronger and forced the Germans into a full retreat for the first time during the campaign.

On 13th September, however, the Germans halted their retreat, and turned to face the Allies, from trenches dug on a plateau in the vicinity of the Aisne river. The Allied troops managed to reach the plateau under the cover of thick fog that night, but were left exposed to raking enemy gunfire by lack of cover when the fog dissipated in the morning sunlight. Both sides dug in at this point – and would move very little over the ensuing four years. Whilst neither side was experienced in or trained for trench warfare, at first the Germans' heavy weaponry proved more effective for this mode of conflict and the British suffered further severe losses. It was at some point during 14th September 1914 that Bernard Hoffmeister was killed at the age of 30 – one of 1,203 allied combatants to die in battle that day. His name appears in the *Scotsman* newspaper of 26th November in the list of those missing in action, and in 1919 a record of military medals has him listed as 'death presumed'. His body was later recovered and buried at the Vailly British war cemetery at Aisne. His remains were identified by a part of his dog tag which contained his service number. The authorities were presumably initially unable to locate his records and he was originally buried as an unknown soldier, with 'Known Unto God' as the inscription on his cross. His identification was later established and the inscription changed in line with a suggestion by his sister Harriet, to 'Lo, I am with you always'. It is poignant to note that, of the 15 burials in that section of the graveyard, by April 1921 Bernard's body was the only one to have been identified.