

# EDMUND BLUNDEN

## HORSHAM'S FAMOUS WAR POET



*The photograph is from The Great War Archive, University of Oxford ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/gwa](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/gwa);  
© Edmund Blunden Literary Estate  
It shows Edmund Blunden - with four old boys of his school, Christ's Hospital - 'The Old Blues'.*

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## Introduction

Edmund Blunden CBE MC (1896 - 1974) is one of the country's most celebrated war poets and writers about the First World War.

Born and spending his childhood in Kent, Blunden was not a Horsham and District lad. But he was educated at Christ's Hospital and served his war years with the Royal Sussex Regiment. His gratitude and love towards both of these institutions, and their great importance to him, remained with him throughout the rest of his life. He saw himself as very much connected with the district, and so it's fair, I think, to present him as one of our literary figures of the month. Because of November's association with Remembrance Day, and recognising that 2019 is the centenary of the official ending of the First World War (with The Treaty of Versailles) we thought he would be a very appropriate choice for our literary-figure-of-the-month-of-November booklet.

Blunden's is one of the 16 names on the slate commemorating the Great War Poets in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey. On that stone are the words of fellow poet, Wilfred Owen (a writer who Blunden, perhaps more than anyone else, made known to the world):

*'My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is the Pity.'*

Blunden was the longest serving of these war poets, surviving a full two years in the front line. He saw action at Festubert, Cuinchy, Richeburg, The Somme, the Third Battle of Ypres and the start of the Passchendaele offensive.

These experiences seared themselves into his mind. Indeed, although he wrote many poems during the War, the subject of war continued in his verse right up until his death. The final poem he published (*Ancre Sunshine* - 1966) was written on the 50th anniversary of the attack on Beaumont Hotel.

You can see a mind haunted by the War, pointed to in these lines taken from a poem written a few years after the War:

### **1916 as seen from 1921**

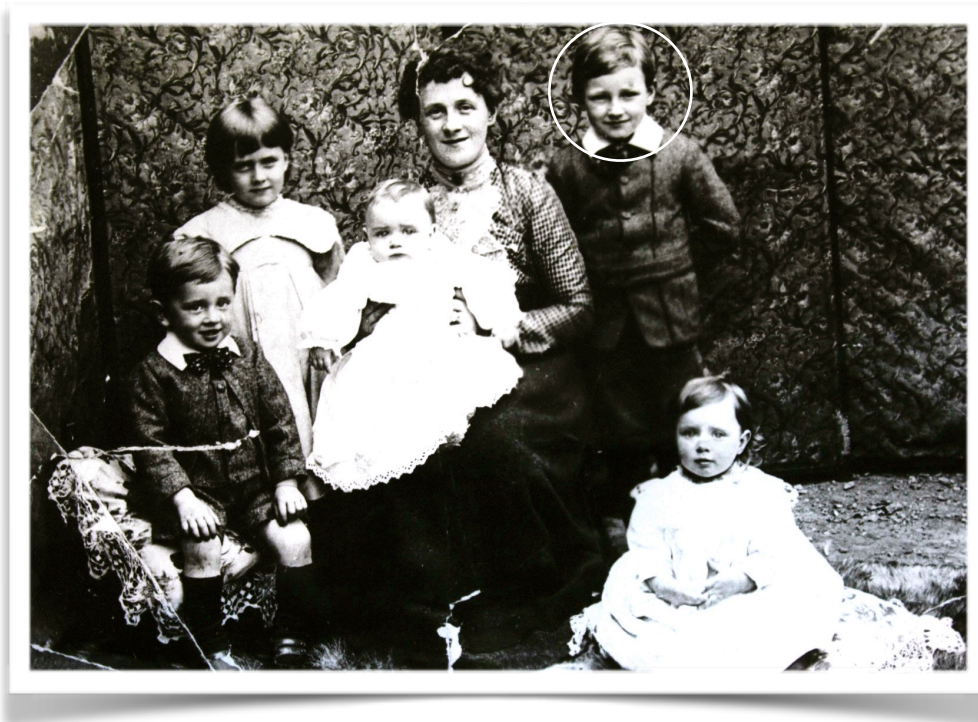
Tired with dull grief, grown old before my day,  
I sit in solitude and only hear  
Long silent laughs, murmurings of dismay,  
The lost intensities of hope and fear;  
In those old marshes yet the rifles lie,  
On the thin breastwork flutter the grey rags,  
The very books I read are there - and I  
Dead as the men I loved, wait while life drags  
Its wounded length from those sad streets of war  
Into green places here, that were my own;  
But now what once was mine is mine no more,  
I seek such neighbours here and I find none.  
With such strong gentleness and tireless will  
Those ruined houses seared themselves in me,  
Passionate I look for their dumb story still,  
And the charred stub outspeaks the living tree.

The loss of friends, the sense of alienation from those now around him in civilian life, who can never truly understand, is presented here. Even the countryside he so loved has become a place in which he no longer feels at home, and, made most memorable in the final line of this excerpt, the horrors of war seem to say more to him than the world in which he now lives.

## **Childhood**

Edmund Blunden was born in London (54a Tottenham Court Road) His parents moved, when he was four years old, to Yalding, a small village in Kent. They were

both teachers - his father taking on the headship of the local Church of England primary school. The young Edmund delighted in the life here - the countryside and the community - an ideal Edwardian English village world. He developed a love of both fishing and of cricket that were to remain with him for the rest of his life. At the age of eight, this thoughtful, most reliable, energetic, bookish and enthusiastic youngster became the regular scorer for the village first eleven.



***This picture is from The Great War Archive, University of Oxford ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/gwa](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/gwa); @ Edmund Blunden Literary Estate. It shows Edmund (standing) with his mother, Margaret and 5 of her 9 children***

## **Schooldays**

In 1909 Blunden won a scholarship to Christ's Hospital School - Horsham's famous public school - to which he formed a life-long attachment. He even wrote a book about it: *Christ's Hospital: A Retrospect* (1923). A diligent scholar, he became keen on poetry and by October 1914, at the age of 17, he considered that he had 44 poems worthy of being published. He had them printed by a Horsham printer (Mr Price of West Street). A hundred copies were produced which were put on sale

for sixpence each. He was also a keen sportsman - even captaining the House cricket team (he was in Coleridge House) and stand-off half in its rugby team.



***This picture is from The Great War Archive, University of Oxford ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/gwa](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/gwa)); @ Edmund Blunden Literary Estate (Blunden is the first figure on the middle row, left-hand side, just below the umpire)***

The passion for cricket, most especially local cricket, was an enthusiasm he would later share with his great friend Siegfried Sassoon.

Membership of the school's Officers Training Course was compulsory and Blunden was an enthusiastic member, but, when war eventually broke out, in July 1914, he did not enlist immediately. School policy was that boys working for university places should complete their courses. This he did, and gained a scholarship to Queen's College, Oxford, to read Classics. Meanwhile his parents had left Yalding and moved to Framfield in Sussex.

However, he did not take up his place in Oxford the following September. Instead, as so many in his generation, he volunteered to join the army. After training, in August 1915, aged 19, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant.

## WAR CAREER

For an insight into Blunden's experience of war you should read his excellent '*Undertones of War*' (November 1928) - a mixture of memoir, autobiography and fiction. It stands alongside Erich Maria Remarque's '*All Quiet of the Western Front*' (translated from German into English in 1929) and Siegfried Sassoon's '*Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*' (1930) as perhaps the most impressive first-hand accounts of the lives of soldiers in the Great War. To demonstrate this, the book has remained in print ever since. So successful was it, that in its first year of sales it had seven impressions. Its appeal to a general readership surprised Blunden considerably - he assumed it would only be of interest or be understood to those who had served in the War.

In his introduction to a much later edition of the book, Hew Strachan tells of how Blunden wrote to his mother in 1918 - "War's classical name should have been Proteus" (In Greek legend, Proteus could alter shape at will) "For Blunden, war constantly changed shape - it contained horror and humour, waste and honour, boredom and intensity, intellectual isolation and comradeship." *Undertones of War* presents most eloquently these contradictions. It also, surprisingly perhaps, in a book with such a theme, points to Blunden's great love of the English countryside and village life - it is a hymn to a pastoral Edwardian England that has been forever lost, but to which Blunden returns so often in his writing. It is a reminder of that idyllic childhood in Yalding.

Blunden joined the 11th Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment, a volunteer company nicknamed 'the Southdown Brigade'. He writes fondly of this regiment - noticing particularly how much fellow feeling there was, including between officers and non-commissioned men. Perhaps this was a consequence of the rural village and small town background shared by all. There is a most interesting account in [www.westsussexpast](http://www.westsussexpast) by Brenda Collins of the relationship between public school educated Edmund Blunden and Frank Worley, a young butcher from Worthing, for example. Worley was six years older than Blunden and had already been in the

army for a year when Blunden joined. In her essay Brenda Collins points to how Worley supported and advised the nineteen year-old second lieutenant and formed a firm friendship that Blunden wrote about many times and which lasted even into the last years of Worley's life (he died in 1954). Worley played an important part in converting Blunden into the successful, popular leader he became - this shy, none-streetwise boy, who at the age of only twenty was obliged to lead whole units of men, and be responsible for their well-being in the most dramatic and dangerous situations. Blunden's lack of class-consciousness is shown also by his 'runner' (or batman) Private Beeney, with whom he kept contact with too, and who, at Blunden's funeral, shared the ceremony by placing a wreath of poppies on his grave.



**Park St. Horsham. Royal Sussex Regt. 4th. Div. leaving. 4.8.14**

**Photo kindly provided by Horsham Museum**

The 11th was certainly an interesting battalion to be in. The senior officers were regular soldiers with experience of action and not only introduced Blunden (who was not, even he would be the first to admit, a natural commander of soldiers in a war situation) to his duties sensitively and helpfully, but soon after Blunden arrived in France, its commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel H.J.Griswood, was actually removed from command after rightly refusing to carry out what would have been a suicide mission for his men. His successor, George Harrison DSO, showed a similar concern for the men under his command - and was to become a good

friend to Blunden. Along with the likes of soon-to-be-sergeant Frank Worley, they helped shape him into a confident, effective and trusted Lieutenant.

‘When I think of them now,’ Blunden wrote of his Southdown Brigade in 1933, ‘bare winter is turned into Spring,’ and, ‘There had never been mutual understanding like it ... wherever you went you saw a friend.’

The events which led Blunden to receive his Military Cross in 1916 for ‘conspicuous gallantry’ came when his unit was attacking a salient called ‘Boar’s Head’. This was part of an action designed to divert German troops from being sent south to support their comrades at the Somme. In the attack some advance units had successfully pushed beyond the German front-line trenches but had become isolated - the German bombardments being so heavy that any chance of further waves of attack became impossible. Blunden was in charge of a carrying party taking bombs forward to the advancing lines. The battle that ensued caused the battalion to lose around 300 men - their four companies were reduced to two.

A month later the battalion attacked and captured a difficult part of the German lines - ‘Stuff Trench’ - but picked up another 279 casualties. By November of that year, when Blunden received news of his award, many of the men Blunden had befriended and loved were dead or had returned home injured. Soon after the Battalion’s numbers were increased with nearly 600 new men, but most, according to Blunden, were ‘not Sussex men’ and he wondered ‘if my battalion was a thing of the past’. By the end of 1916 the battalion’s losses had reached a massive three-quarters of its original strength.

Blunden spent much of the following year, 1917, in and around Ypres. By now, despite some military successes, he had become somewhat cynical about the value of the strategies behind the offensive, especially as it was being reported back in England as a series of major successes.

The 11th became involved in a German counter-offensive in August. It suffered another 275 casualties. Blunden was certainly shaken badly by it, not least



because two of his 'Old Blue' (ex-Christ's Hospital School) friends had been killed (see picture of the front page of this booklet).

In February 2018, Blunden was sent home for a much-needed six months' rest. He was given the job of training new recruits. During this time he married Mary Daines (the daughter of a local blacksmith who lived near his training camp in Suffolk). However, he was full of guilt at being away from the 11th back in France. In March the battalion was involved in a desperate piece of action - losing 300 'other ranks' and 20 officers. To all intents and purposes, the Southdown Brigade ceased to exist.

Blunden's survival for all that time at the Front had been remarkable. Psychologically, as already mentioned, the scars ran deep and remained with him. He also suffered permanent damage to his lungs from gas inhalation in 1917. Only in his writings did he express much of his thoughts about the war - perhaps it was therapy. In public he talked little about his experiences, and was modest about his contributions - explaining his quite remarkable survival as to do with his small stature which made him an 'inconspicuous target.'

A year before his death in 1974, Blunden said 'My experiences in the First World War have haunted me all my life, and for many days I have, it seemed, lived in that world rather than this.'

And it is memories such as the one in the poem 'Escape' that Blunden lived with. Notice here how the horror is also fused with a black humour - both in the brutal, unsentimental description of the corpses as well as an awareness of the class divisions in society that were emphasised in the culture of the army:

## ***Escape***

*A Colonel -*

There are four officers, this message says,  
Lying all dead at Mesnil.  
One shell pitched clean amongst 'em at the foot  
Of Jacob's Ladder. They're all Sussex men.  
I fear poor Flood and Warne were of that party.  
And the Brigade wants the identified...

*A Mind -*

Now God befriend me,  
The next word not send me  
To view those ravished trunks  
And hips and blackened hunks.

*A Colonel -*

No, not you, Bunny, you've just come down.  
I've something else for you.  
Orderly!  
(Sir!)  
Find Mr Wrestman.

Demobbed in 1919 he continued to contribute to the memories of those who died or who suffered during the War, both by his contribution to editing and bringing to the world the works of Wilfred Owen and Ivor Gurney and also by, in 1936, succeeding Rudyard Kipling as the Literary Adviser to the Imperial War Graves Commission (now called the Commonwealth War Graves Commission).

A poem that I think shows Blunden's war poetry at its most memorable and typical is *Concert Party: Busseboom*. You will see in it that sense of intensity - of both the comradeship and of the horrors that intertwine the experience of war for him and which are juxtaposed so effectively in the poem. It records a joyous concert party shared by all. Then, in its last lines it refers to an actual event, where British

tunnellers near the front were intercepted while attempting to lay explosives under the German lines. The fighting that ensued was hand-to-hand.

### **Concert Party: Busseboom**

The stage was set, the house was packed,  
The famous troop began;  
Our laughter thundered, act by act;  
Time light as sunbeams ran.

Dance sprang and spun and neared and fled,  
Jest chirped at gayest pitch,  
Rhythm dazzled, action sped  
Most comically rich.

With generals and lame privates both  
Such charms worked wonders, till  
The show was over: lagging lotyh  
We faced the sunset chill;

And standing on the sandy way,  
With the cracked church peering past,  
We heard another matinée,  
We heard the maniac blast

Of barrage south by Saint Eloi,  
And the red flames flaming there  
Called madness: Come my bonny boy,  
And dance to the latest air.

To this new concert, white we stood;

Cold certainty held our breath;  
While men in the tunnels below Larch Wood  
Were kicking men to death.

You can see in the poem a lack of pomposity or strained 'poetic devices'. This is true of all of Blunden's writing. He was an academic of some note (as we'll see later) - but his poetic language was both down-to-earth and clear - not for him over-elaborated or old-fashioned 'poesy' or the clever contrivances of 'modernism'. Blunden's writing (and there is a great deal of it) is very readable.

## **Blunden's Post-War Career**

Although this booklet has been to do with marking the Great War and Edmund Blunden's rôle as a war poet, his future career and contribution to world of English literature needs also to be told.

After the Armistice of November 1918, the twenty-two year old Lieutenant Blunden returned to France to assist with the clearing up operations. He remained in service until 17th February 1919, returning to his wife who was expecting their first child. The couple moved to Boar's Hill near Oxford. Sadly, their daughter, Joy, died later that same year, only five weeks' old, while on a visit to Blunden's parents - probably from drinking infected cow's milk. Blunden was devastated.

In the same year he met up with Siegfried Sassoon, another war poet and literary editor of 'The Daily Herald' (one of the big national newspapers of the time) to whom he had sent some poems. The friendship they established lasted throughout Blunden's life. They both shared a passion for cricket (Blunden's book *Cricket Country* - published in 1944 - demonstrates the fact most effectively).

In October 1919 Blunden took up his place at Oxford University. However, he left the following year. Perhaps the academic world was too strange for him after his years of military action and certainly he needed a better and regular income (two



volumes of poetry written during the war had already been published but there was little money to be made from that). He took up a part-time editorial post in a periodical (*The Athenium*) and wrote as a literary critic for *The Nation* and *The Times Literary Supplement*. Most importantly, he developed connections with the London literary circle of the time - Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey, E.M. Forster et al - the Bloomsbury Set - contacts which were to prove most useful as his career as a literary critic and academic developed.

In 1921 he travelled to South America aboard a cargo steamer. Ostensibly this was to help him recover his health (both the psychological damage of his wartime experiences as well as the ling damage). In 1922 he wrote a travel book about the journey - and travel writing was something he returned to throughout his life.

In 1924 he became Professor of English at Tokyo Imperial University. Was this an opportunity to distance himself from those memories of war? It enabled him to write with some perspective '*Undertones of War*' (1928) mentioned above.

Returning to England in 1927, Blunden went back to his work as literary critic but also resumed some military service in the Oxford Training Corps.

Blunden was a prolific writer throughout his life. As well as his own poetry and travel writing he wrote a number of literary biographies. He wrote biographies of Henry Vaughn (usually spelt like that), the 17th Century Metaphysical poet, Leigh Hunt (a central figure in English Romantic poetry). He championed John Clare, for example, a Victorian poet who was institutionalised as being insane, but who, largely because of Blunden, achieved great posthumous fame) as well as a number of other writers left somewhat marginalised by history - William Cobbett, Robert Southey, Charles Lamb, Thomas Hood, Michael Drayton, for example. He also wrote a biography of Thomas Hardy and a 1946 biography of Shelley, in which he concluded that Shelley had been murdered rather than accidentally drowned in the boating accident in the Bay of Naples (see our April booklet on Shelley - or download it from our website).

In 1931 he returned to Oxford University - as a Fellow of Merton College - remaining in this post for the next thirteen years. He became a popular and very effective tutor. However, his relationship with his wife, who had not gone to Japan with him, ended in divorce. They had two children together. It was also in this year that his very influential *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* was published.

In 1947 he returned to Japan as a member of the British Liaison Mission in Tokyo where he remained for the next three years.

Then, in 1953, he accepted the post of Professor of English Literature at the University of Hong Kong where he was to remain for more than a decade before retiring in 1964 to settle finally in the village of Long Melford, Sudbury, Suffolk.

In 1966 he was nominated for the Oxford Professorship of Poetry, in succession to Robert Graves. After two years, finding the strain of this prestigious position, with its requirement for very demanding lecturing with high expectations too much for him, he resigned.

By this time Blunden had produced - as editor or writer - well over 50 books during his lifetime. Thirty-two of these were books of his own poetry, there were a number of biographies, several edited and introduced editions of the writing of other authors, a few travel books, a book about cricket, a novel 'We'll Shift our Ground' (co-written with his second wife Sylva Norman in 1933) as well as countless articles and essays in *The Times Literary Supplement* (he became assistant editor of this periodical in 1944), *The Atheneum*,

He had married a second wife, Sylva Norman in 1933, but his marriage, too, ended in divorce. In 1945 he married a third time to Claire Poynting with whom he had four more children.

Honours include the CBE, 1951; the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry, 1956; The Royal Society of Literature's Benson Medal; The Order of the Rising Sun, 3rd Class, 1963; and Honorary Membership of the Japan Academy.

Blunden died at his home, in 1974, of a heart attack and he is buried in the churchyard of Long Melford's Holy Trinity Church.

Bryan Webster



HORSHAM DISTRICT  
**YEAR OF  
CULTURE**  
2019

*Picture from The Great War Archive, University of Oxford ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/gwa](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/gwa)); @ Edmund Blunden Literary Estate.*



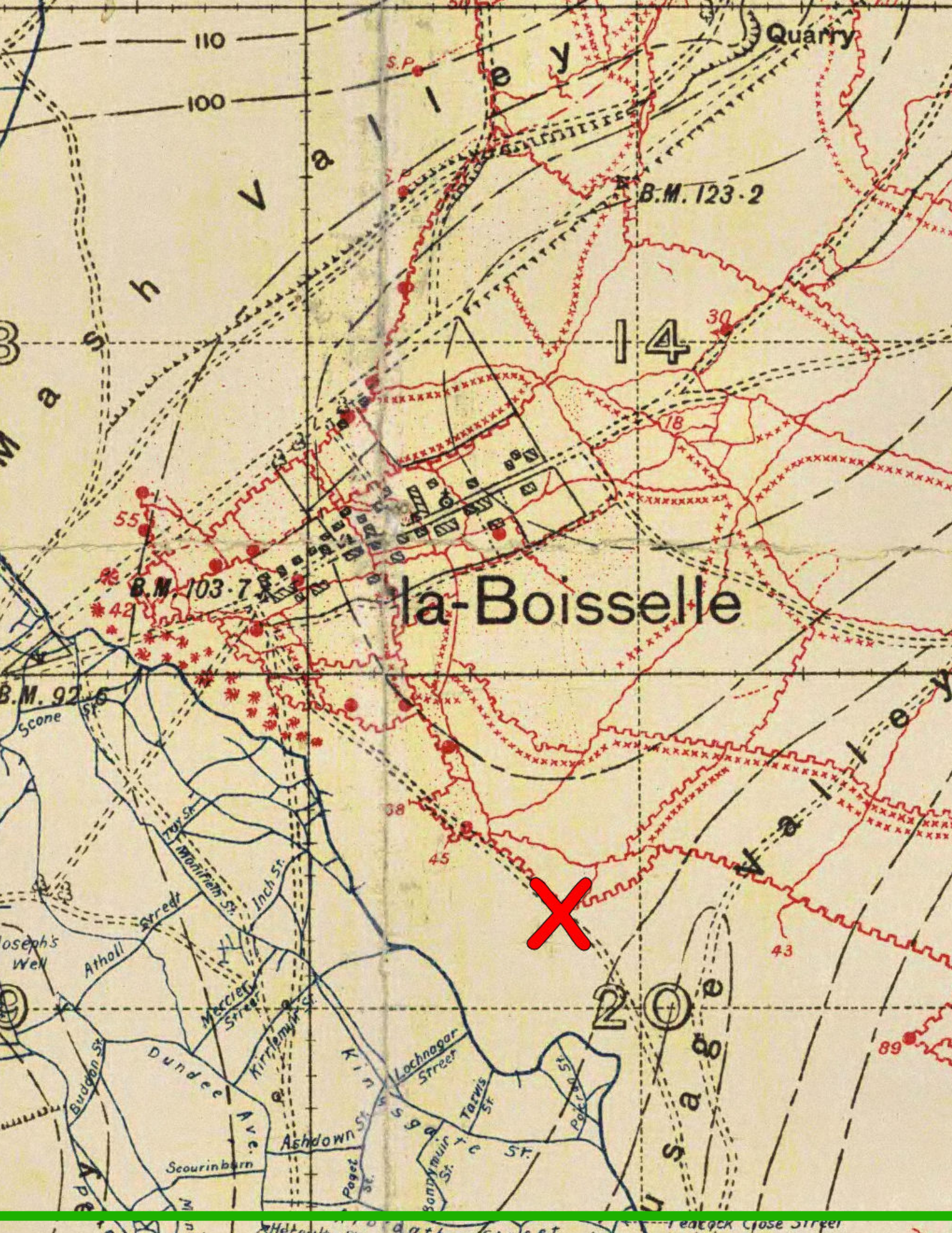
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