

## **Herbert Cairns**

**1892 - 1917**

**Educated at Bede Collegiate School and Brasenose College Oxford**

**Died near Ypres, aged 25, on 4 October 1917**

### **Family and Education**

Herbert Cairns was born on 26 August 1892 in South Bishopwearmouth, Sunderland, to Sara S Scott, the daughter of a ship owner, who in 1891 was living with her parents, aged 27. Between 1897 and 1902 she had three further children with Herbert's father, David Cairns, but they did not marry until early in 1901. David was a master butcher and a Methodist. He became a councillor and, in 1927, Mayor of Sunderland.

Herbert went to Bede Collegiate School, whose headmaster noted that 'his is the only case that has come under my observation of a lad's passing the Intermediate Arts Examination when he was only sixteen years of age'. He won a Mathematical scholarship to Brasenose College and began there in 1910, giving his home address as 4 Toward Terrace, Sunderland. His mother Sara died the same year, and at the 1911 census Herbert was living with his father, his siblings, and Sarah's sister Appellina Scott, who may have moved in to run the household. David and Appellina married in 1913.

Herbert gained Second Class in his exams in 1912 and graduated with Second Class Honours in 1914: 'he had a keen interest in Pure Mathematics and in many other subjects ... For Applied Mathematics he had little enthusiasm'. He had planned to teach in France to improve his French and experience a different educational system, but the war made that impossible and instead he took a post at Newcastle-under-Lyme Grammar School. Then in November 1915 he joined the Inns of Court Officers' Training Corps, which trained thousands of volunteers at a camp at Berkhamsted Common. He was eventually commissioned Second Lieutenant in the Kings Royal Rifle Corps and joined his battalion on 14 April 1917.

### **War Service: 13<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion, Kings Royal Rifle Corps**

Herbert's battalion had landed at Boulogne on 31 July 1915 and had seen a good deal of action. When he joined them the unit was involved in a series of attacks at the Battle of Arras. In the early summer he was wounded by a bullet in the shoulder and sent to hospital in London. Then from the end of July his unit fought in the Third Battle of Ypres: he rejoined them and was at the Battle of Polygon Wood (26 September - 3 October).

On 4 October Herbert led a raiding party tasked with capturing a position in the enemy line. They were met with heavy machine-gun fire but he pressed on and was killed. An officer in his battalion who had been his contemporary at Brasenose wrote that 'it was a very gallant performance'. His body was not recovered. He was aged 25, and he is remembered on the Tyne Cot Memorial, at Brasenose College, and also at Bede Collegiate School.

---

This is the story of one of the men who appear on a war memorial at Wesley Memorial Methodist Church in Oxford, UK. These stories were compiled in 2018-19 from a variety of family history and military sources. In particular, Chris Baker's site, 'The Long, Long Trail' has provided valuable details of the men's experience of battle:

<https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/>

Herbert Cairns's story incorporates details kindly provided by Brasenose College from its archives. Brasenose College also has a photo of Herbert but was not able to give permission to reproduce it here.