

The Irregular Death of Captain Geoffrey Batty, 6th Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment, and Its Painful Consequences

Captain Geoffrey Batty was officially reported as having died of wounds on 27 September 1916 during the attack on Thiepval. Yet no-one saw him dead, nor was his body ever found. He was never officially regarded as missing. Until the end of the war his parents continued to hope that he was a prisoner of war or in hospital with memory loss. Thereafter, while Batty's father reluctantly accepted his death, his mother could not come to terms with the absence of his body. This article points to the processes involved in dealing with casualties during the war and the importance of officers commanding units in the field reporting casualties accurately.



Captain G.G.H. Batty

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Among the twelve names of officers of the 6th Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing is that of Captain Geoffrey George Horn Batty. He is recorded as dying on 27 September 1916. His name is there because he has no known grave. Yet, unusually for a man commemorated on a memorial to the missing, he was neither reported missing nor reported killed in action. Instead, he died of wounds, an official form of words that, in his case, was to cause confusion and consternation in the War Office and to have tragic repercussions for his family. This short biography of Batty seeks to explain how this episode came to occur and how it affected his family, especially his mother.

Geoffrey Batty was one of four children of Herbert (1849-1923) and Minnie (1853-1942) Batty. He was born in Poona, Bombay on 17 October 1894, where his father was Judge of the High Court in the Indian Civil Service.¹ It is not confirmed, but it is likely that Geoffrey was the youngest child and there may have been a considerable age gap between him and his siblings, as Herbert and Minnie had married in 1873. In 1908 his father retired to England and in September Geoffrey entered Marlborough College. He was to spend nearly four years at the school, from September 1908 until August 1912, and he was a member of the OTC,

¹ Select Births in India, Ancestry.Co, <https://search.ancestry.co.uk/cgi-bin/sse.dll?db=FS1IndiaBirthsandBaptisms&h=544644&indiv=try&vc=Record:OtherRecord&rhSource=1543> .

reaching the rank of Corporal. He was a good gymnast.² Geoffrey subsequently went up to his father's old college, Christ's, Cambridge, where he was still studying when war broke out.

Batty immediately joined the university OTC and applied to the university's Special Committee for a commission, which was approved on 10 August 1914.³ He was gazetted 2nd Lieutenant on 14 September and posted to the 6th Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment then based at Colchester.⁴ In less than two months he was promoted to Lieutenant. Batty's smooth progression in the army came to a sudden halt in late February 1915 when he contracted pneumonia and he spent time in hospital. It took him several months to recover, a period when the 6th Battalion was making its final preparations to join the BEF. Struck off the strength of the battalion, Batty was attached to the 3rd (Reserve) Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment in April. Why he was attached to another regiment remains unclear—the CO of the 3rd Battalion had no idea—but it may have been the result of the battalion being based in Kent, close to the Batty family home in Sevenoaks. On the other hand, the 6th Battalion had a surfeit of officers while under training and it may be that Batty was dropped for this reason.⁵

Batty had no intention of cutting his links with the 6th Northamptonshire Battalion. He had received encouragement from the battalion's CO, Lt-Colonel G.E. Ripley, who before leaving for France had asked the War Office that Batty be sent to his battalion as soon as possible. In September 1915 Batty formally requested to be sent overseas and, in preparation for this, he was posted to the 8th (Reserve) Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment. He finally reached France on 17 December and after a few days at base camp joined the 6th Battalion with three other subalterns.⁶ His first taste of the realities of trench warfare came on the 29th when, after a very heavy bombardment, German troops entered the 6th Battalion's trenches near Morlancourt and captured twenty men who were sheltering in a dug-out.⁷

Batty's new unit was part of 54th Brigade, 18th (Eastern) Division, one of the more distinguished New Army divisions that was to play a major role in various large operations that together made up the Battle of the Somme between 1 July and 18 November 1916.⁸ On 1 July the 6th Northants Battalion was in support of the 11th Royal Fusiliers and 7th Bedfordshire Regiment in the division's attack on the German positions between Mametz and Montauban. According to the battalion's War Diary, 'The [54th] Brigade had undergone a week's previous training over ground laid out on the plan of the German trenches to be attacked and were in fine fettle when the day arrived'. When the battalion left its trenches at 8am on the 1st July, it 'advanced as steadily as if they were on the parade ground'. By about 10.15am all objectives had been taken and consolidated 'and the task allotted to the Battalion had been accomplished'.⁹

² Marlborough College Archives,

<http://archive.marlboroughcollege.org/ViewText.aspx?RecID=29&TableName=ephemeraitems> .

³ Service Record, Captain G.G.H. Batty, TNA PRO WO 339/33.

⁴ *The London Gazette*, 18 September 1914, p.7400.

⁵ Tim Machin (ed), *From Bedford to the Somme: The Letters and Diaries of Denzil Heriz-Smith* (Leicester 2007), p.121.

⁶ Medal Index Card, Capt. G.G.H. Batty, Ancestry.Co.UK. The War Diary does not mention his arrival, but a letter from another subaltern who travelled from Waterloo station with Batty confirms the date. Machin, *Heriz-Smith*, pp.165, 259.

⁷ War Diary, 6th Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment, 29 December 1915, TNA PRO WO 95/2044.

⁸ 18th Division has been described as 'a typical New Army Division', the battlefield performance of which was to be 'distinguished'. Peter Simkins, *From the Somme to Victory: The British Army's Experience on the Western Front 1916-1918* (Barnsley 2014), p.86. See also, Peter Hart, *The Somme* (London 2006), pp.418-419.

⁹ Narrative of the part taken by the 6th (Service) Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment in the attack on the German position between Mametz and Montauban, War Diary, 1 July 1916, TNA PRO WO 95/2044.

Total battalion casualties were 160, a small number compared with those suffered by other battalions during the attack further north on that tragic day. Remarkably, only three officers were wounded and one of these remained at duty. Batty's reaction to his first major attack was ambiguous: relief at surviving unscathed; expectations of further success; but a determination not to make the army his career and conscious of the carnage caused by modern warfare. On 7 July Batty wrote to his elder sister, 'Dear old Maud', who was living in India:

I expect you've heard all about the big push. Well we've been through a week of it so far and I am thankful to say I've come through so far without a scratch. We are resting a bit now, and we are jolly glad of it. By the time you get this I hope we will have a pretty good bit of this old score settled. Our men are in excellent spirits and v[ery] optimistic. ... I hope I shall not have to stop on in the Army. I expect there will be jobs going for some of us, even though we are not qualified for anything more than this glorified butchery. Well we all look forward to the day when we will be back in good old England.¹⁰

The battalion had little rest, for its next task, on 14 July, was to capture Trônes Wood, a major German strongpoint that had resisted all previous attempts to take it.¹¹ Although on two occasions the British had appeared to have secured the wood, German counterattacks had pushed them back, so that when the 54th Brigade went into action, only the southern part of the wood was in the hands of the 7th Battalion Royal West Kent Regiment. Both Sir Douglas Haig and General Henry Rawlinson, commander of Fourth Army, thought it essential that the wood be taken before the main attack on the Germans' second defensive line on the Bazentine ridge took place. This could not be accomplished and the final assault on Trônes Wood by 54th Brigade took place at the same time as the main battle.

Under the original plan—as was usual at this time it was hastily arranged, with verbal rather than written orders—the 6th Battalion was to act as support for the 12th Middlesex, mop up behind the main assault, due to start at 4.30am, and form a defensive line on the eastern edge of the wood once it had been cleared. The battalion was under the command of 2 i.c. Major S.H. Charrington for the attack and the whole operation was to be commanded by Lt-Colonel Frank Maxwell, VC, CO of 12th Middlesex.¹² The attack began inauspiciously, when Maxwell was unable to find his battalion. He ordered the 6th Battalion to lead the attack instead. With hardly any preparation, therefore, the 6th began its advance across more than half a mile of shell-swept open ground, which led to heavy casualties, and entered the wood from the south. There they met groups of the 7th Royal West Kents, who were holding their positions but facing the wrong way, having become disoriented. Reports of what happened over the next few hours are confused, but according to the 6th Battalion's War Diary, the wood had been cleared of all enemy except a few snipers by 11.30am: 'The brunt of the fighting had been borne by the 6th Northants, who had suffered severe casualties both in officers and men'.¹³

This was not how Maxwell recalled the situation. In his memoirs he claimed that after the 6th Northants had advanced to the edge of the wood, instead of stopping to reorganize:

¹⁰ Matthew J. Ball, Sevenoaks War Memorial, https://www.ancestry.co.uk/mediaui-viewer/collection/1030/tree/55969607/person/44003972236/media/c5a2ebfb-186b-48a1-a2c5-ef839cbefda3?_phsrc=nhB8433&usePUBJs=true .

¹¹ For the attempts before 14 July to take Trônes Wood, see Chris Baker, 'The Capture and Defence of Montauban, 1-13 July 1916', *The Long, Long Trail: The British Army in the Great War of 1914-1918*, <http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/battles/battles-of-the-western-front-in-france-and-flanders/the-battles-of-the-somme-1916/the-capture-and-defence-of-montauban-1-13-july-1916/> .

¹² Charrington was a scion of the big brewing family.

¹³ 'Operations resulting in the capture of Trones Wood', War Diary, 6th Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment, 14 July 1916.

The CO [Charrington] got muddled and didn't do this, and consequently didn't have a dog's chance of doing anything except be killed just in the same way that other regiments had been for the same fault. Fortunately, I stopped mine inside and kept them in hand. Then waited for reports to come back from the Northants. None came, nor could come as they were soon lost and broken up into small bodies playing just the same game the Germans like for it let them fire at them from sideways and behind.¹⁴

In fact, officers of the 6th Battalion had been reporting back to their HQ, but Maxwell could not know that as he was in the thick of things in the wood, a situation that he acknowledged a commanding officer should not get into. What seems to have happened is that the 6th Northants did get through the wood but did not entirely clear it. That task was left to Maxwell, with a collection of troops from both the 6th Battalion and the 12th Middlesex, who systematically 'beat' the woods by traversing it in a wide line, shooting as they went.

Whether or not the 6th Battalion blundered into success, 54th Brigade achieved its objectives and prevented the German machine guns enfilading the 9th Division as it advanced on the left. Batty once again survived this ordeal unscathed, although 6th Battalion casualties were far higher than on 1 July. By 15 July 303 casualties had been reported, including 15 officers, seven (including the attached RAMC doctor) being killed or dying of wounds.¹⁵

After two major attacks on the Somme the battalion badly needed rest and reorganisation and was sent to a village near Hazebrouck in the Nord, not returning to the Somme trenches until the middle of August. Responsibility fell heavily on the officers who had survived the July assaults. Denzil Heriz-Smith admitted to his mother at the end of July that he 'will be a bit nervy ... going into the trenches for the first time with many men who have not had that experience before' and with officers 'who are nothing like the old lot'.¹⁶ Battle training lasting three weeks in August, however, left 18th Division 'in fine fettle', according to the Official History.¹⁷ They needed to be, for on 26 September they were to be part of Reserve Army's attempt to crack the toughest German nut on the Somme, Thiepval and the nearby Schwaben Redoubt.¹⁸

The attack 'was part of a major co-ordinated operation ..., the aim of which was to take the ridge running from Thiepval to Courcellette. By seizing the crest line, the British and Canadians would deny the Germans observation over the battlefield southwards towards Albert while simultaneously giving the BEF good observation over the Ancre valley'.¹⁹ 18th Division had drawn the short straw, with 54th Brigade given the task of taking Thiepval and its chateau, with the intimidating Schwaben Redoubt just to the north. Frank Maxwell informed his wife after the event that they had fought over 'the most awful country that human being ever saw or dreamt of; July 1 was a playground compared to it and the resistance small. ... I confess that I hated the job from the first ... and hadn't personally any particular hopes of accomplishing it'.²⁰

¹⁴ Quoted in Hart, *The Somme*, p.277.

¹⁵ It is possible that Batty, like his CO, was left out of this attack. Denzil Heriz-Smith wrote that he was the only officer involved in both the 1 and 14 July attacks to survive unscathed. Machin, *Heriz-Smith*, p.239.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp.243-244.

¹⁷ Capt. Wilfred Miles, *Official History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium 1916*, Vol. 2 (1938: Uckfield n.d.), p.394.

¹⁸ For the importance of the Thiepval region for the German defences on the Somme, see Jack Sheldon, *Fighting the Somme: German Challenges, Dilemmas and Solutions* (Barnsley 2017), p.32.

¹⁹ Simkins, *From the Somme to Victory*, p.88. See also Miles, *Official History 1916*, Vol.2, pp.391-393.

²⁰ National Army Museum, First World War in Focus, <http://www.1.nam.ac.uk/stories/lieutenant-colonel-francis-maxwell/#.W3E-o5MzY8Z>.

The 6th Northants' role was to be in close support of the leading battalion, the 12th Middlesex Regiment, with B and C Companies being ready 'to reinforce the 12th Bn. Middx. Regt. as quickly as possible if required'.²¹ Further, if the Middlesex battalion could not reach its final objective, the 6th Northants would make the attack instead.

Batty was OC B Company.²² With the attack due to start at 12.35pm, at 9.15am on the 26th B Company left their dugouts in South Bluff and moved to their "forming-up" trench in Campbell Avenue, arriving there at 10.19am. Advancing in touch with the rear Company of the 11th Royal Fusiliers, B Company reached Fifth Avenue at 11.35am. Advancing through a very heavy enemy barrage the company arrived in a trench just south of the remains of Thiepval Chateau. From there it moved forward to support Maxwell's 12th Battalion in the centre of the line near the second objective. 'It was while advancing from the CHATEAU that Capt. Batty, gallantly leading his men, was severely wounded.'²³ The Company now had no officers and was led to the objective by the Acting Sergeant-Major.

The Battle of Thiepval Ridge, as it came to be called, was a soldier's battle, with close combat fighting among the myriad German dugouts and shell holes caused by three months of bombardments. The Germans put up a fierce resistance and continually counter-attacked when positions were overrun.²⁴ It is not surprising, therefore, that official reports of casualties were delayed. GHQ initially heard that Batty had been wounded; not until 2 October did Charrington, Acting CO of the 6th Battalion after Ripley was badly wounded, report that Batty had died of wounds on 27 September. Batty's parents received the news that their son had been wounded on 30 September. Assuming, perhaps understandably, that Batty was in hospital, Herbert Batty immediately asked the War Office if they should go to France to see their son. No more was heard until 5 October when another War Office telegram informed them that Batty had died of wounds.²⁵

At the same time Batty's parents received two consolatory letters from the battalion, one, from 2nd Lt C.K. Chatham, 2 i.c. of B Company, and one from Charrington. Both raised perplexing issues regarding Batty's fate; neither gave clear proof that he was dead. Chatham's, dated 2 October 1916, purported to give:

All the exact facts of the death of your son on 26/9/16. He was hit by a sniper, one bullet passing through his side, and one thru' his shoulder, while leading the Company in a charge against Thiepval which we subsequently captured. He was not killed instantly and I am glad to say he suffered practically no pain. Our stretcher-bearers were sent to him but by the time they got to the place some other stretcher-bearer had found him and taken him away. We have made enquiries at all the dressing stations but can find no trace of him and I am afraid he must have died on his way down to the dressing station and the bearers left him to get another man who was alive. ...I hope it will be some consolation to you to know that he died bravely at the head of his men leading them on to victory. ... I am the only officer left in the Company now. It is terrible and I suppose my time will come someday.²⁶

²¹ Role of the 6th Bn. Northants Regt, 25 September 1916, War Diary, 6th Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment.

²² Batty was gazetted Captain on 15 July 1916. Service Record, Captain G.G.H. Batty, TNA PRO WO 339/33; *London Gazette*, 10 October 1916, p.9821.

²³ Narrative of the part played by the 6th Bn. Northamptonshire Regiment in the capture of Thiepval on the 26th September 1916, War Diary, 6th Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment, 26 September 1916, pp.1-2.

²⁴ Jack Sheldon, *The Germans at Thiepval* (Barnsley 2006), pp.87-98.

²⁵ Service Record, Captain G.G.H. Batty, TNA PRO WO 339/33.

²⁶ 2nd Lt C.K. Chatham to Herbert Batty, 2 October 1916, *ibid.* Despite his pessimism, Chatham survived the war.

The explanation for why Batty's body had not been recovered is plausible but little more than guesswork.

Charrington's letter had the same date as Chatham's. He, like Chatham, had been held back at the battalion's transport lines during the initial attack (as part of the policy of keeping a certain percentage of experienced officers and men as a cadre ready to rebuild the battalion if heavy casualties were sustained). The mortal wounding of the battalion's CO, however, required Charrington to take charge of the battalion and while going up to the front line he saw Batty 'shortly after he had been hit and he was practically unconscious ...'. This was, he wrote, 'on the evening of the 26th September' and he died of his wounds early the following morning.²⁷ Neither Chatham nor Charrington, therefore, personally saw Batty dead. Who reported the event to Charrington, and when, remains unknown, but it was the Acting CO who informed GHQ initially that Batty was wounded and then that he had died of wounds.

At this point it will be useful to rehearse the procedures used by the War Office in officially determining death. The War Office Section responsible for dealing with Regular Army officer casualties—including those serving in Service battalions—was MS 3 Casualties.²⁸ It would accept reports of death *only* from two official sources: GHQ and 3rd Echelon, the Deputy Adjutant-General's department at the Base in Rouen. Charrington's report of Batty dying of wounds that came from GHQ, therefore, was accepted and became official. Hence the second telegram to Batty's parents. But when Herbert Batty took his two letters to the War Office, some doubts arose, for Charrington's letter suggested that when he last saw Batty he was still alive and Chatham's raised the issue of how Batty could have been reported as dying of wounds if his body had not been found. If Charrington had reported Batty as killed in action there would have been no problem, but "died of wounds" was another matter, for MS 3 Cas. had not received any notification from 3rd Echelon (DAG), which usually was the conduit for deaths occurring in hospitals and Advanced Dressing Stations. Chatham's letter made it clear that Batty had not died in any Casualty Clearing Station either.

As neither letter could confirm that Batty had been *seen* dead, rather than severely wounded and still alive more than eight hours after being hit, the War Office opened an inquiry on 11 October. The DAG's department contacted Charrington but rather than querying Batty's death, merely asked who made the initial report and 'whether the place of burial can be given'. Charrington's reply, dated 22 October, was that he had made the report and that there was no information on Batty's burial. The Graves Registration department also confirmed that no burial was known to have taken place. Batty's parents were informed on 3 November.²⁹

The Battys initially remained unconvinced that their son was dead. Only in February 1917 were official steps taken by the Accounts Department at the War Office to settle Batty's affairs. As was common among relatives of the missing, head and heart remained in conflict. Considered rationally, Batty was dead; accepting this reality emotionally was much more difficult. Given that the BEF held the ground after the battle, it was highly unlikely that Batty was a prisoner of war. One slight possibility explaining Batty's disappearance was that he had been taken to hospital with loss of memory. This explanatory option preyed on Minnie Batty's mind, for on 18 September 1917 she asked MS 3 Cas. 'what institutions there are in France and England to which a wounded officer would be sent on losing his memory from shock or injury?'.³⁰ After confirming that she was inquiring about her son, the Military Secretary replied that while 'it is quite possible that an officer might not be identified for a

²⁷ Major S.H. Harrington to Herbert Batty, 2 October 1916, *ibid.* I am grateful to Stebie9173 of the Great War Forum for his assistance with Charrington.

²⁸ Officers serving in Territorial units were dealt with by another Section.

²⁹ Service Record, Captain G.G.H. Batty, TNA PRO WO 339/33.

³⁰ Mrs. M.H. Batty to WO, 18 September 1917, *ibid.*

few days ... I know of no case of an officer remaining unidentified for any considerable period in a hospital under the control of British or French authorities'.³¹

Strangely, before the War Office reply had been received, the Battys had placed a memorial notice in a local Northampton newspaper that seemed to show that they had accepted his death. Under the heading, DIED OF WOUNDS, it stated:

Batty, Capt. Geoffrey G.H. Northants, ... wounded on September 26, 1916, to die of wounds the following day; received his commission in the Northants in 1914. The officer commanding his regiment writes: "He was shot whilst leading his men into action most gallantly. I am told that to encourage his men to advance under an extremely heavy fire he calmly walked out in front of them and lit a cigarette to show them he was not afraid."³²

The nagging and distressing uncertainty, oscillating between acceptance and hope, that plagued the Battys throughout the war is best brought out by a letter Herbert Batty sent to the War Office a week after the Armistice in November 1918, when the prisoners of war were returning home. 'My son', he wrote:

Was reported wounded on 26th September and *apparently* [my italics] reported to have died of his wounds on the 27th September 1916. But from further information received it appears that his death was only inferred from the fact that the stretcher-bearers—sent by the Regiment to carry him to a Clearing Station—were unable to find him, and we have been unable to obtain any information either as to his burial or as to his having been seen again. In these circumstances, we cling to a hope that he may have survived and though not posted as taken prisoner, yet may reappear among those taken. I trust therefore you will take a note of this case, and ... let me know should any information reach you about my son.³³

No further information was forthcoming.

There is evidence to suggest that although, after the war, Herbert Batty reluctantly came to accept his son's death, his wife retained hope. Each year between 1919 and 1933, with a break from 1928 to 1932, Batty was the subject of an *In Memoriam* notice in *The Times* around the anniversary of his death.³⁴ The death of Herbert Batty in 1923 led to a change in the formula of the notice. From September 1923 Batty was no longer recorded as having fallen while leading his men in action, but as having been reported 'wounded and missing', a much more indeterminate phrase (but which reflected the reality of Batty's case). This change suggests that while her husband had accepted their son's death, Minnie Batty felt unable to make this irrevocable commitment. In the final *In Memoriam* in September 1933 Mrs. Batty added a paraphrase from the Bible, John XX.13: 'We know not where they have laid him'. This is a reference to Mary Magdalene's reply to two angels who had asked her why she was weeping, after she had found Christ's tomb empty. From a Christian viewpoint, this is evidence of a glorious event, the Resurrection. For Minnie Batty, however, although it linked her son to Christ's sacrifice and resurrection it also highlighted the fact that the absence of her son's body remained a painful and bitter memory long after he was killed.

³¹ Military Secretary, WO to Mrs. Batty, 6 October 1917, *ibid*.

³² *Northampton Daily Echo*, 27 September 1917. A similar notice was also placed in the *Times*, 26 September 1917.

³³ Herbert Batty to WO, 28 November 1918, Service Record, Captain G.G.H. Batty, TNA PRO WO 339/33.

³⁴ *The Times*, 26 September 1919, 27 September 1920, 26 September 1921, 26 September 1922, 27 September 1923, 27 September 1924, 28 September 1925, 25 September 1926, 26 September 1927, 27 September 1933.

The key to understanding this unfortunate case lies with Charrington's second report and the policies of the War Office regarding casualties. It appears that Charrington never received confirmation from survivors of the attack that Batty was dead, but having seen Batty himself lying, as he thought, mortally wounded, he declared him as dying of wounds, even though he must have received information that Batty was still alive many hours after he had seen him. Strictly speaking, Charrington ought to have reported him as wounded and missing. If he had done so, MS 3 Cas. would have initiated an inquiry that would have involved Batty's name being sent to Berlin via the American Embassy for news and his name being given to the Red Cross, whose volunteers would have sought information from the 6th Battalion's wounded who were in hospitals either in France or the UK. Using these processes may have elicited more concrete information (the Red Cross volunteers were very effective in finding information about the missing). For its part, War Office regulations precluded such investigations when an officer was officially reported as having been killed in action or died of wounds. In a sense this was a Catch-22 scenario, which left the Battys in limbo until after the war.

From the evidence available it is impossible to say with any certainty what happened to Batty's body. Despite the Grave Registration Units scouring the ground after the battle, it was never found. If Chatham's guess is correct, it may have been moved back from where he originally fell, thus explaining the failure of any battalion searches. What is most likely, however, is that Batty's body, like so many of those of the missing, was buried or obliterated by the enemy shell fire that continued to bombard the area for days after Batty was wounded. As a result, he is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing.³⁵

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³⁵ Batty was also commemorated in a number of other places: on the Sevenoaks War Memorial; in the Marlborough College Memorial Hall; in the *War List of the University of Cambridge 1914-1918*; and on a plaque attached to his father's headstone in the graveyard of St John-at-Hampstead (Herbert Batty died in 1923).