

Another Son Jack: Captain James Leslie (Jack) Buckman in Life and Death

12th (Bermondsey) Battalion, East Surrey Regiment

Probably the most famous only son called Jack who was killed and disappeared in the Great War was Rudyard Kipling's.¹ The subject of this article is another Jack, a less well-known casualty of the war but equally mourned by his parents. James (Jack) Buckman was born on 11 November 1892 in East Dulwich, part of the London Borough of Camberwell. He was the only child of James Buckman and his wife Mary Jane, née Neighbour. He attended Fairfield Preparatory School in Southwark and, between 1907 and 1910, the prestigious Westminster public school, possibly as a Day Boy.² At the time of the UK census in April 1911 he was living with his parents at "Maryville", 161, East Dulwich Grove, Dulwich, and described as a law student.³ In the following October, only a month from his nineteenth birthday, he went up to Wadham College, Oxford as a commoner and graduated BA in June 1914.⁴ His intention was to read for the bar at the Middle Temple, until war intervened and changed the course of his life.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Buckman family was part of the aspiring, respectable British middle class. They lived in a nine-room, two-storey semi-detached house with one live-in servant on the outer eastern fringe of the wealthy area of Dulwich village. When he married Mary Jane in December 1884 at St Matthew's Church, Hammersmith, James Buckman Snr had described himself as a 'gentleman'.⁵ But he was marrying the daughter of a rate collector and, in reality, he was a clerk, his father Simeon had been a farm labourer in Kent and one of his brothers was a country blacksmith.⁶ James Snr had thus pulled himself up the social scale by his bootstraps in true Samuel Smilesian fashion. By 1901 he held a responsible position as Treasurer of Bermondsey, a poor and mainly working-class dockside borough.⁷ This would have given him a comfortable but not large income and sending his only child first to Westminster and then to Oxford would have been a financial strain for him but a social necessity. When he died, in 1941, he left only £648 in his will.

As an only child, James Jr would naturally have been the focus of his parents' hopes and social aspirations. He appears to have been rather delicate in childhood, possibly cosseted by an indulgent mother (a not uncommon practice among Edwardian families with only one son and heir). He did not join either his school's or his college's OTC and his college obituary states that 'delicate health prevented him from reading for Honours and from taking any part in athletics . . .'. Nevertheless, as soon as war broke out in August 1914 he sought to join the army. Initially, he applied to the Oxford University OTC, but withdrew after a few days and instead applied for a commission through the university's Military Board. Presumably because he had had no military training, he was not regarded as a prime candidate. Moreover, his medical

¹ Tonie and Valmai Holt, *My Boy Jack? The Search for Kipling's Only Son* (Barnsley 2001). Whether Kipling ever called his son Jack is the subject of debate.

² *Record of Old Westminsters*, vol. 1, p. 135.

³ 1911 Census.

⁴ Wadham College, Oxford Archives. I am grateful to the archivist at Wadham, Cliff Davies, for his help.

⁵ St Matthew's, Hammersmith, Marriage Register, Ancestry. Co.

⁶ 1861 Census.

⁷ 1901 Census.

examination was equivocal. At 5' 11" he was tall, but he weighed only nine stone, his chest was underdeveloped and he wore glasses. He was not rejected outright but placed on a waiting list. A few weeks later the War Office accepted Buckman for a commission and in November he was posted as 2nd Lieutenant to the 8th (Service) Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment, which was in training near Salisbury Plain.⁸

Life in the army suited him, for his delicate health seemingly disappeared. He obtained a first-class certificate in musketry (despite his eye problems) and was sent on a special staff course at Camberley, strong evidence that his superiors thought he had leadership potential.

If Buckman had stayed with the 8th Battalion he would have gone to France in July 1915 as part of the 19th (Western) Division, but circumstances in Bermondsey changed that and his baptism of fire was to be postponed for nearly a year. In May 1915, at a time when voluntary recruitment to the army was in serious decline, the War Office asked the Lord Mayor of Bermondsey if the borough would be prepared to sponsor the raising of a new battalion. After some discord the council agreed to do so, with the new battalion to be called the 12th (Bermondsey) Battalion, East Surrey Regiment. James Buckman Snr was appointed executive officer of the recruiting committee. Using his influence, he persuaded the authorities to allow his son to transfer to the new battalion on 29 June, even though the 8th Gloucestershires were only days away from leaving for France.⁹ Buckman joined his new unit as a temporary Lieutenant and was promoted to Captain in October, being made OC, B Company. Taking responsibility for about two hundred men and four or five officers would have been a daunting burden for a young man who appeared to have been rather diffident and retiring during his formative years. What evidence exists suggests that he seized the moment.

The 12th East Surreys were competing in south London for recruits with a number of other military units, including the new 11th (Lewisham) Battalion of the Royal West Kent Regiment. All found enlistments slow, despite the vigorous use of various recruitment techniques, such as mass parades, visits to cinemas and widespread advertising. Many of those who did enlist were subsequently found to be too old, too young, or unfit. Only towards the end of the year, when it became clear that the Derby recruitment scheme, which allowed men to enlist and wait to be called up at a later date, would be replaced by conscription, did the battalions complete their numbers.¹⁰ The 12th East Surreys were allotted to the 122nd Brigade of the 41st Division and completed their training at Aldershot. On 1 May 1916 they embarked for France, landing at Le Havre the next day.

Like all the other new divisions sent to France, the 41st Division was initially given a relatively quiet sector of the line to defend while finding their feet. Buckman's battalion spent the next few months around Ploegsteert ("Plug Street"), south of Ypres in Belgium, as they became accustomed to the niceties of trench warfare. They initiated several raids on the German trenches, but there is no evidence from the War Diary that Buckman participated in these. Except during one particularly heavy

⁸ Personal Record, Capt. James Leslie Buckman, NA PRO WO 339/980.

⁹ *London Gazette*, 13 July 1915, p. 6837.

¹⁰ *The Times*, 9, 10, 11 December 1915.

bombardment, casualties were few. On 23 August the battalion began its journey south by train towards the Somme battlefields.¹¹

The battle of the Somme had begun on 1 July and after horrendous losses the British army had advanced through the Germans' first two main defensive lines by early September. A third major phase of the battle was planned for 15 September, with the intention of breaking through the enemy's original third line. The 41st Division, now part of Sir Henry Rawlinson's Fourth Army, was given four objectives, the most important being the capture of the village of Flers and consolidation beyond it. Operational orders to the division were encouraging if peremptory: 'The attack will be pushed home with the utmost vigour all along the line until the most distant objectives have been reached. For the last two and a half months we have been gradually wearing down the enemy. His moral[e] is shaken, he has few, if any, fresh Reserves available, and there is every probability that a combined determined effort will result in a decisive victory'.¹²

Ten tanks, the new secret weapon, were to be used in the division's sector and, for almost the first time, British battalions were to advance close behind a creeping artillery barrage, in the expectation that the first waves of attackers would arrive at their objective before the enemy had emerged from their dugouts. At the time, the 12th East Surreys had a strength of 36 officers and 777 other ranks. Seventeen officers and 634 other ranks were chosen for the attack, with the battalion in the second wave of the 122nd Brigade behind the 18th King's Royal Rifle Corps.

Zero hour was 6.20am. In the attack Flers was taken but not fully consolidated on the day, partly as a consequence of the extremely high casualty rate amongst the officers of the brigade.¹³ Of the seventeen officers of the 12th East Surreys who went into battle, only one returned unscathed. Among the six killed, who included three of the four company commanders and the battalion's commanding officer, was Jack Buckman. No evidence remains to explain how or where he died, but most likely he was killed during the initial advance on Flers. His body was, however, found. The new commanding officer of the battalion sent Buckman's wristwatch to his father and subsequently his parents also received other small personal effects, but fighting in the area in 1918 probably destroyed his temporary grave, the coordinates of which were never sent to the authorities. He is thus one of four officers of the battalion killed on 15 September commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing.

James and Mary Jane Buckman received a War Office telegram confirming their son's death on 20 September. Unfortunately, in their grief they failed to notice that the telegram used the surname Buchanan rather than Buckman. Not until the Buckmans began the process of probate was the error pointed out at Somerset House, when they went to register Jack's death. James Buckman Snr was commendably very restrained and polite when he informed the War Office of this mistake. He received a letter of apology from the Military Secretary at the War Office and in December a new telegram with his son's name spelt correctly.¹⁴

¹¹ 12th East Surrey War Diary, NA, PRO WO 95/2634.

¹² Operational Order No. 21, 14 September 1916, 10th Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment War Diary, NA, PRO WO 95/2638.

¹³ Trevor Pidgeon, *The Tanks at Flers* (Cobham 1995), Vol. 1, p. 165.

¹⁴ Personal Record, Capt. James Leslie Buckman, NA PRO WO 339/980. There is also an error on Buckman's Medal Index Card, where he is reported as 'Died 5 September 1916'.

Buckman, according to the battalion history published in 1936, had been 'idolised' by his men and 'was a thoroughly efficient man in every way, and many feel that a brilliant Army career was cut short by his death at Flers'.¹⁵ This tribute would have been of no consolation to his mother, for she had died in 1934, at the age of 71. For every year before then, however, she and her husband had inserted a series of *In Memoriam* messages in the *London Times*. Until 1925 messages were published both on the anniversary of their son's death and on his birthday (the irony of his date of birth could not have been overlooked). An uncle and aunt also paid for an annual memorial message. The last *In Memoriam* was published in 1933, suggesting that it was Buckman's mother who kept the torch alight.

Jack Buckman's death was undoubtedly a tragedy for his family, made all the worse by the absence of a grave. By repeatedly mentioning in their memorial notices that he was an only child, they were, perhaps unconsciously, not only emphasising the totality of their sacrifice but also acknowledging the emptiness of their future. But their situation was by no means unusual. No less than one-quarter of the 402 British officers killed or mortally wounded on 15 September 1916 were either only sons or had all their brothers killed in the war (Jessop, mentioned below, was also an only son).¹⁶ Family ambitions were, therefore, blighted and family lines came to an end on a large scale as a result of the war.

How did the Buckmans deal with their grief and, in the father's case, the possible guilt he may have felt for the role he played in his son's transfer to (and death in) the East Surrey Regiment? Their memorial notices suggest that they fell back on their religious values to explain their plight and on the patriotic doctrine of sacrifice for their country to justify their loss. Grief mixed with pride and with spiritual consolation in their memorial notices, which sought to give meaning to their son's death. 'He died that we might live', as appeared in their 1922 notice, hints at Christ's sacrifice as well as their son's death in protecting their freedoms.¹⁷ In 1918 they alluded to their own sacrifice, willingly made: 'And we grudge him not, England, to thee'.¹⁸ On Jack's birthday in 1919 the *In Memoriam* was a rather extraordinary conflation of birth notice and memorial: 'On the 11th November 1892, at Dulwich, Mrs James Buckman, of a son, James Leslie, her only child, since given to preserve the freedom of his fellows'. There follows the plaintive 'See what desolations are in the world', with the more positive Christian injunction, 'Sursum Corda' (Lift up your hearts).¹⁹ Here, quite clearly, Mary Jane is asserting her role as 'sacrificial mother'.²⁰

Twice, in 1918 and 1928, the Buckmans used the phrase 'His presence, not his memory'. As in 1924 and in 1927 they referred to Jack as 'always present', this may be interpreted as evidence of their reluctance to let their son go, their refusal to condemn him to the realm of memory.²¹ But the phrase is also the title of a short book of verse and hymns by the Anglican clergyman, John Samuel Bewley Monsell

¹⁵ John Aston and L. M. Duggan, *The History of the 12th (Bermondsey) Battalion East Surrey Regiment* (London 1936), p. 51.

¹⁶ The figure of 402 comes from my own research on the first day of the battle of Flers-Courcelette.

¹⁷ *The Times*, 11 November 1922.

¹⁸ *The Times*, 14 September 1918.

¹⁹ *The Times*, 11 November 1919.

²⁰ Jill Damousi, *The Labour of Loss. Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia* (Cambridge 1999), p.5.

²¹ *The Times*, 14 September 1918, 11 November 1924, 12 November 1927, 15 September 1928.

(1881-1875). It may not be a coincidence that the Buckmans chose this statement, for the book was published in 1855, the year that Monsell's son Thomas was drowned en route to the Crimean War. Monsell also wrote the words to the hymn "Fight the Good Fight with all Thy Might".²² The Buckmans, therefore, sought consolation by using the traditional Victorian language of remembrance to find purpose in their loss.

To their credit, the Buckmans did not forget that many others serving in the 12th Battalion also died and they commemorated them every year too. In 1918 they offered 'a tribute of respect to the officers, NCOs and men of the "Black Hand Gang" 12th (Service) battalion East Surrey Regiment who have died for their country'. This was an allusion to a major raid led by Captain Frederic Devereux Jessop, OC, D Company, on the German front line trenches at Plug Street (Jessop won a Military Cross for this enterprise but was to die of wounds on 15 September). They had found the trenches unoccupied, but left a board with a black hand painted on it.²³ In 1932 the Buckmans gave 'homage to [Jack's] fellow officers and men who gave their lives for "King and England"'.²⁴

In the end and inevitably, grief was softened by time. In 1921 their son was 'sadly missed more and more by his Mother and Father; in 1923 'His death is an ever-abiding sorrow to his bereaved mother and father'. Ten years later, however, emotional rawness had been replaced by acceptance and fond memories: 'Remembrance of him is sweet and pleasant' and 'cherished remembrance of a son without reproach' (the last an allusion to the knight of chivalry so prominent in Victorian medievalism).²⁴ James and Mary Jane were left with a mellow memory of an idealised son, although the sorrow could never be entirely erased.

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²² D. J. O'Donoghue, 'Monsell, John Samuel Bewley (1811–1875)', rev. Leon Litvack, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2009 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/prospero.murdoch.edu.au/view/article/18982>, accessed 8 Sept 2012]

²³ Aston and Duggan, *12th (Bermondsey) Battalion*, p. 32.

²⁴ Stefan Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory* (Cambridge 2007), p. 14.