

PRIVATE LEONARD GURNEY

24688, 14th Battalion, Worcestershire Regiment

Died aged 29 on 13 November 1916

Remembered with honour on *Thiepval Memorial*; Pier and Face 5A and 6C

Commemorated in Tewkesbury at the Cross and in the Abbey



Thiepval Memorial, France



Worcestershire Regiment

LEONARD GURNEY was born in Tewkesbury in 1887 (as Walter Leonard) to William Gurney and Mary Ann (formerly Wall). William was born in Welland and Mary Ann came from Upton-on-Severn; they had at least 11 children. William was a general labourer and the family lived in Jeynes Row and then Post Office Alley. He died in 1895 aged 55 and Mary Ann died five years later in 1900 aged 57. The loss of parents had serious consequences in that epoch. By 1901 the family was clearly scattered: Leonard was an inmate in the Tewkesbury Workhouse whilst two of his younger siblings were living with his older sister Elizabeth, who had married Frederick Andrews in 1888; one of his older brothers, Francis Gilbert, was a patient in the Gloucester County Asylum. Over the years Leonard's mother and several of his brothers had been to court for various petty offences. Leonard was a former pupil of Trinity Schools and, in 1911, was working as a cowman on the farm of William Smith at Walton Hill.

Leonard enlisted in Tewkesbury in October 1915 but was posted to the 14th (Pioneer) Battalion, the Worcestershire Regiment, a Kitchener's New Army unit formed at Worcester on 10 September 1915 by the local MP, Lieutenant Colonel Henry Webb. The battalion was originally known as the 'Severn Valley Pioneers' and landed at Le Havre on 21 June 1916 where it came under the command of the 63rd (Royal Naval) Division. Lt. Col. Webb had already established another such battalion the previous year: 13th (Forest of Dean Pioneers),

Gloucestershire Regiment. The role of the pioneer battalions was to provide skilled labour to supplement the work of the sappers of the Royal Engineers in the construction of redoubts, emplacements and other field works; they were also equally capable of fighting as infantry.

Soon after arriving in France, the division took over the trenches on Vimy Ridge and remained in the general area of Arras for the next three months, being employed to work on the surrounding defences.

At the beginning of October 1916, the division began to move to the Somme front where it would take part in the *Battle of the Ancre* (13-18 November 1916), the final phase of the *Battles of the Somme*. This was the division's first major operation on the Western Front, although it had previously served in Gallipoli. The battalion was split into companies that accompanied infantry units into battle in order to consolidate defences and build communication trenches from the start line to captured German trenches.

Private Leonard Gurney was killed in action on 13 November 1916, the first day of this battle and just five days before the Somme campaign of 1916 ended. The *Register* reported that he had been '*killed instantly by a shell whilst out with a party at night*'. His body was never recovered nor identified and he is commemorated instead on the *Thiepval Memorial*.

Leonard's younger brother, **Pte. Frederick Gurney**, was discharged from the Royal Field Artillery in 1919 with a *Silver War Badge*.