

## Sapper William James Norman 59519 64<sup>th</sup> Field Company, Royal Engineers



William James Norman was born in Barnstaple in May 1885, the eldest son of William and Susanna Norman of 47, Bradiford. In this family photograph from about 1904, he is centre back with his parents and siblings. He married Mary Ellen 'Nell' Norman (née Ford) in 1907 and they had lived at 12 Carrington Terrace, Yeo Vale Road, Barnstaple, since 1910.

Before joining the Royal Engineers, just after the outbreak of war in 1914, he was a carpenter working for Mr H Slee, a builder of Braunton. A

very notable thing he produced was the sign of the three tuns, the small ornamental wooden beer barrels which hung outside the Three Tuns Public House in Barnstaple High Street. When the Three Tuns closed in about 2007, and became a Pizza Express Restaurant, the three tuns were rescued by John Norman, his grandson, and presented to the Museum of Barnstaple & North Devon.

The 64<sup>th</sup> Field Company, Royal Engineers, was attached to the 9<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division. Field companies of the Royal Engineers provided technical skill and know-how in support of the divisional fighting units. The 9<sup>th</sup> Division came into existence as a result of Army Order No. 324, issued on 21 August 1914, which authorised the formation of the six new Divisions of K1. It consisted of the first volunteers of Kitchener's 'Pals', referred to as 'K1s' or 'the First Hundred Thousand' under the administration of Scottish Command.

Having been in training at home since late August 1914, although only gradually were arms and equipment available, the recruits were judged to be ready for war by May 1915. The units of the Division crossed to France 9<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> May 1915. The 9<sup>th</sup> Division served on the Western Front throughout the rest of the war, in particular the Battles of the Somme in 1916. It was regarded by many as one of the best fighting formations of 1914 -18.

In the summer of 1916, the 64<sup>th</sup> Field Company was attached to the South African Brigade, which had joined the 9<sup>th</sup> Division, during their attack and capture of Delville Wood (known as 'Devil's Wood' to the South Africans). The Battle of Delville Wood (from 15<sup>th</sup> July – 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1916) was a series of engagements in the Battle of the Somme 1916. The Brigade was ordered to capture Delville Wood 'at all costs', which they did but with great loss. However, they consolidated their gains between 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> July and held on to the Wood despite heavy German shelling.

The 64<sup>th</sup> Field Company suffered particularly heavy casualties losing 11 officers and 200 other ranks. It was not relieved until 20<sup>th</sup> June having, in the words of the *Official History* "done excellent work, both in such consolidation as was possible, and as a fighting unit." It seems likely that William was seriously wounded, with a broken left

thigh, early in the battle and he was evacuated to the 23<sup>rd</sup> General Hospital at Etaples on the French coast south of Calais for treatment. However, he died from his injuries on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1916 at the age of 31 and is buried in the Etaples Military Cemetery.

In a short letter to his wife Nell, possibly written the day before he died, he said:

*I am wounded. The left leg is broken and this is the hospital name above. I did it more than a week ago. I am too bad to write more. So goodbye dear Nell and the dear little children.*

*William*

Mary Ellen Norman was left a widow with six children, William John (Jack), Leslie, Mark, Walter Moore, Reginald Charles and Richard Stephen.

William was awarded, from left to right, the 1914 Star, the Victory Medal and the British War Medal, and his family received the Memorial Death Plaque, right.



Many thanks are due to John Norman, William James' grandson and Richard Stephen's son, to Brian Barrow, for his tremendous work in collecting information on all the men of Pilton who died in the Great War, and to the many online postings relating to World War I, the Battles of the Somme and the Royal Engineers.