

**Private Charles Edward Smith©**  
**Regimental number: G/6073**  
**9th Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment**

**born: 14 May 1897 – died: 1 June 1916**

At the age of 13, Charles Edward Smith was working at a colliery in Cannock, Staffordshire, England operating a “coal screen above ground.”<sup>1</sup> At the age of 19, he was dead and buried in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension Nord, Grave II. B. 124 in France.<sup>2</sup>

Charles was the eldest of the six children born to Frank Smith and Elizabeth Thorpe. His parents were both born in Staffordshire villages about 3 km apart; his father (15 September 1870)<sup>3</sup> in Edingale to William and Eliza Smith and his mother (14 December 1868)<sup>4</sup> in Haunton to Charles and Elizabeth Thorpe. Both came from families that made their living as agricultural labourers. Frank was working as a ploughboy when he was 10 years old<sup>5</sup> while Elizabeth at the same age was attending school.<sup>6</sup> By 1891, she was working as a housemaid at Hooper Hall House in Brampton Bierlow, Yorkshire.<sup>7</sup> Five years later, with Emma Julia Rowe and George Shaw as witnesses, Frank Smith and Elizabeth Thorpe were married in Burton upon Trent (Burton),<sup>8</sup> Staffordshire.

Charles Edward was born on 14 May 1897 and baptized on 7 June 1897 at St. Paul’s, Church of England, Burton.<sup>9</sup> Two more children followed. His brother, Frank Oswald, was born on 9 November 1898<sup>10</sup> and his sister, Elsie May, on 9 June 1900.<sup>11</sup> Their baptismal certificates note that the family was living on Wellington Street and Frank Smith was a labourer. Probably for economic reasons, the family relocated a number of times to different villages all within a 40-km radius of Burton. By 1901 the family had moved to the Alvecote Buildings, Shuttington, Staffordshire. Frank Smith worked as a “stoker, stationery boiler.”<sup>12</sup> The family stayed there about three years and then relocated to Hamstead Village, which housed the miners working at the Hamstead Colliery near Birmingham. Two children were born there: Gladys Annie in the last quarter of 1904<sup>13</sup> and Cyril Joseph on 29 April 1906.<sup>14</sup> Two years later the family moved once again, this time to Cannock in south-central Staffordshire, some 40 km from Burton. Frank and Elizabeth’s last son, Harold Arthur, was born here on 21 September 1908.<sup>15</sup>

In 1911 the population of Cannock Urban District was 28,586.<sup>16</sup> Many of the inhabitants made their living in the coal mines of the Cannock Chase District. The Smiths were living in the Hills Buildings on Stafford Road. Frank Smith was working as a “stoker colliery boilers above ground” and Charles Edward at age 13 was working the “coal screen at the colliery above ground.”<sup>17</sup> Cannock became the home town for the Smith family, who continued to reside on Stafford Road (although at a different address) as late as 1939.<sup>18</sup>

During the next three years, Charles probably continued to work in the coal mines. When war was declared on 4 August 1914, he would have been 17 years old; like many others at the time he was probably caught up in the patriotic fervour that swept the country. In the fall of 1914, two military training camps, Brocton Camp and Rugeley Camp, capable of housing 40,000 men, were constructed on Cannock Chase land owned by Lord Lichfield. The first troops began to move into the huts in early 1915. Approximately 500,000 men trained there through the course of the war.<sup>19</sup> To Charles, the military life must have seemed exciting and an opportunity to escape the drudgery of the coal mines. He enlisted in the 9th Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment at Cannock.<sup>20</sup>

The Royal Sussex Regiment was a line infantry regiment that was officially formed in 1881 as part of the Childers Reforms. However, it could trace its history back to over 100 years earlier. At the onset of the war it consisted of six battalions with its headquarters in Chichester, West Sussex. It raised 17 more battalions once war was declared. The 9th Battalion was one of these, formed in Chichester in September 1914.<sup>21</sup>

The Royal Sussex Regiment gave all new wartime recruits a regimental number from a new series prefixed with the letter "G/".<sup>22</sup> By the beginning of 1915, it lowered the height requirement for recruits to 5 ft 1 in (154.94 cm) although it maintained that a man had to be between the ages of 19 and 38 to enlist.<sup>23</sup> In September 1914, the height restriction for the army was raised from 5 ft 3 in (160.02 cm) to 5 ft 6 in (167.64 cm) to reduce the number of men trying to enlist. But as recruitment levels fell and demand for recruits increased the height level was back at 5 ft 3 in (160.02 cm) by November 1914.<sup>24</sup>

The battalion's War Diary and an interview given by its Regimental Sergeant-Major, Lewis Bonney, to the *Eastbourne Gazette* on 7 June 1916 provided a glimpse of Private Charles Smith's life in the military. Although Charles had enlisted in Cannock, he did not receive his training in the new camps on Cannock Chase. Instead, the 9th Battalion, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel John F.P. Langdon, moved to South Downs to join the 73rd Brigade of the 24th Division. Langdon had been a major when he retired after 22 years with the Royal Sussex Regiment. When war was declared he reenlisted, was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel and assigned command of the new 9th Battalion. Bonney described Langdon as a proper father to the regiment.<sup>25</sup> In December 1914, the battalion moved into billets in Portslade, East Sussex, and then on to Shoreham, West Sussex, in April and Woking, Surrey, in June 1915, where the recruits received musketry training at the ranges at Bisley. Private Charles Smith was with the battalion<sup>26</sup> whose strength was just over 1,000 men when it left Woking on 21 August 1915 to march to Southampton, where it boarded the S.S. *La Marguerite*, disembarking at Le Havre, France, on 1 September 1915.<sup>27</sup>

In the 10 months (1 September 1915–7 June 1916) that the 9th Battalion had been at the Front, Regimental Sergeant-Major Bonney reported that it had experienced its full share of hard fighting. He felt that the recruits had the very great advantage of serving under officers who spared no pains to increase the efficiency of the battalion. This training was tested almost immediately when the battalion went into action at Loos, France, on 25–27 September 1915. The Battle of Loos was the biggest British attack of 1915, the first time that the British used poison gas and the first mass engagement of the new army units.<sup>28</sup> The 9th Battalion, which was divided into four companies (A, B, C, and D), was ordered to hold Fosse 8. Two companies were assigned to trenches in front of an enormous slag heap, while the other two companies were posted on top of the slag heap in two parallel lines. The order to withdraw did not reach the men in the trenches, who were in danger of being surrounded. For three days they survived without food, water and sleep. They fought their way out resulting in 381 casualties.<sup>29</sup> Bonney felt that it was a tremendous christening for a young battalion.<sup>30</sup>

From there, the 9th Battalion was stationed in the trenches of the Ypres Salient area of Belgium, where it remained through the first half of 1916, involved in day-to-day trench warfare, shelling, sniper fire and small skirmishes. Rest periods from the forward trench area were taken in cellars or barracks at Ypres or Poperinge. A gift of cigarettes and peppermints arrived on 2 February 1916 from the Royal Sussex Soldiers Cigarette and Comfort Fund.<sup>31</sup> On 13–14 February 1916, the battalion suffered heavy casualties at Hooge, on the Ypres–Menin Road. Sergeant-Major Bonney reported that the battalion was in trenches only 80 yards (73 m) from the German line. The enemy shelled them for 13 hours, then attacked but were pushed back. The men of the 9th advanced to a

crater and dragged a machine gun in with them. They wired the place and made the position stronger.<sup>32</sup> During the shelling a D Company platoon was buried alive.<sup>33</sup> By 15 February, the 9th Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment recorded five officers and 134 other ranks as casualties.<sup>34</sup> Besides injuries from shelling and sniper fire, illness also plagued the battalion. On 16 February, the officers had difficulty finding 200 men for a working party. Many were ill and sent to hospital.<sup>35</sup>

During March, April and May of 1916 the battalion continued the routine of being in and out of the front line trenches. March was recorded as cold with a good deal of snow. In April, the battalion was in trenches near Kortepyp. Charles Smith would probably have attended the Easter Sunday service on 23 April conducted by the Chaplain, Reverend M. Dodd, who had made his way to the Front.<sup>36</sup> On 28 and 30 April 1916 the gas alarms sounded. The first was a false alarm but on 30 April, the enemy sent a gas cloud of chlorine and phosgene toward the allies at Wulverghem about 4 km from Kortepyp. The enemy attacked the left flank of the 9th Battalion but were driven back.<sup>37</sup> By 14 May the 9th Battalion was in the trenches at Stinking Farm, where there were a few casualties throughout the day.<sup>38</sup> Then on 28 May it was in the trenches at La Plus Douve Farm, where it was shelled every half hour in the evening. The following days, 29–31 May, were listed as quiet. <sup>39</sup>

How, when or where Private Charles Smith was injured was not recorded. Perhaps it was at La Plus Douve Farm during the shelling or on one of the “quiet” days. He was taken to 1st Canadian Casualty Clearing Station (CCS) at Bailleul, France. He might have been one of the 134 injured men admitted on 31 May 1916 or one of the 140 existing patients.<sup>40</sup> He was one of the three men who died 1 June 1916.<sup>41</sup> On 16 August 1916 Elizabeth Smith, his mother, was sent his savings of £12 7s 10p. On 23 June 1919 she was sent a War Gratuity of £5 10s.<sup>42</sup>

Private Charles Edward Smith was buried at Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, Nord Grave/Memorial Reference II. B. 124.<sup>43</sup> Bailleul is in France, close to the Belgium border. It was occupied on 14 October 1914 and became an important railhead, air depot and hospital centre. Several casualty clearing stations, including 1st Canadian CCS, were quartered there. The earliest Commonwealth burials at Bailleul were made in April 1915. An extension was built and burials continued until April 1918; they occurred again in September and after the Armistice, when soldiers’ remains were brought in from the neighbouring battlefields.

Charles was awarded posthumously the Victory Medal (for service in an operational theatre), the British War Medal (for service overseas between 1914 and 1918) and the 1914-15 Star (for serving in a theatre of war between 4 August 1914 and 31 December 1915).

There seemed to have been a problem with delivering the medals to his family; the medals were returned. His mother reapplied for them and they were reissued 23 April 1923 and sent to 186 Stafford Road, Cannock.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps she was motivated by the plans of the Cannock Urban District Council to construct a monument in memory of the men of Cannock who had died in the Great War. On 22 May 1923, the monument was unveiled with 120 names listed. Charles Edward Smith’s name (Ch. E. Smith) was engraved on the third panel.<sup>45</sup> His name would also be listed with the 6,800 regimental casualties from the Great War on the panels in the Royal Sussex Regimental Chapel, Chapel of St. George, Chichester Cathedral.<sup>46</sup>

Private Charles Edward Smith must have been mourned by his parents and siblings. Would they have been consoled by the words of Sergeant-Major Bonney, who said that “if we say that the men of the 9th Sussex can claim that they have tried to do their duty and not to fall below the standard set by other gallant regiments at the Front we shall be paying them the highest tribute they could desire”? <sup>47</sup> On the eve of another war in 1939, the Smith family was still living in Cannock, working

in the coal mines. Charles Smith's father Frank, at the age of 69, was employed as a "colliery boiler man hewer heavy". His mother Elizabeth was performing "unpaid domestic duties." Two of his brothers were living with them. Frank Oswald was working as a "colliery road deggie below heavy" and Cyril Joseph was working at the "colliery screen hand above heavy."<sup>48</sup> Elsie May had married and was living with her husband and children in Cannock.<sup>49</sup> Harold had married and was living with his family in Willenhall, Staffordshire, but seemed to be working in the mines.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "1911 England, Wales & Scotland Census," *Findmypast* ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk); accessed 28 February 2017), entry for Charles Edward Smith, Registration district: Cannock, Registration district number: 368, Sub-district: Cannock, Sub-district number: 2, Piece: 16937

<sup>2</sup> *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* ([www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org); accessed 22 February 2017), entry for Smith, C., Service No: G/6073

<sup>3</sup> "1939 Register," *Findmypast* ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk); accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Frank Smith, Ref: RG101/5386K/017/43, Letter Code: ORKF

<sup>4</sup> "Staffordshire Baptisms," *Findmypast* ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk); accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Elizabeth Thorpe, Archive reference: D6614/1/1, Page: 11

<sup>5</sup> "1881 England, Wales & Scotland Census," *Findmypast* ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk); accessed 28 February 2017), entry for Frank Smith, Registration district: Tamworth, Archive reference: RG11, Piece: 2769, Folio: 138, Page: 6

<sup>6</sup> "1881 England, Wales & Scotland Census," *Findmypast* ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk); accessed 19 April 2017), entry for Lizzie Thorpe, Registration district: Tamworth, Archive reference: RG11, Piece: 2769, Folio: 113, Page: 1

<sup>7</sup> "1891 England Census," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com); accessed 4 March 2017), entry for Elizabeth Thorpe, Registration district: Rotherham, Electoral district, institution, or vessel: 11, Piece: 3855, Folio: 72, Page: 10

<sup>8</sup> "England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1837-1915," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com); accessed 8 March 2017), entry for Elizabeth Thorpe, Registration district: Burton upon Trent, Inferred county: Staffordshire, Volume: 6b, Page: 485

<sup>9</sup> "Staffordshire Baptisms," *Findmypast* ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk); accessed 28 February 2017), entry for Charles Edward Smith, Archive reference: D6008/1/2, Page: 239

<sup>10</sup> "Staffordshire Baptisms," *Findmypast* ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk); accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Frank Oswald Smith, Archive reference: D6008/1/2, Page: 281

<sup>11</sup> "Staffordshire Baptisms," *Findmypast* ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk); accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Elsie May Smith, Archive reference: D6008/1/2, Page: 327

<sup>12</sup> "1901 England, Wales & Scotland Census," *Findmypast* ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk); accessed 28 February 2017), entry for Frank Smith, Registration district: Tamworth, Archive reference: RG13, Piece: 2650, Folio: 72, Page: 9

<sup>13</sup> "England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837-1915," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); accessed 8 March, 2017), entry for Gladys Annie Smith, Registration district: West Bromwich, Inferred county: Staffordshire, Volume: 6b, Page: 835

<sup>14</sup> "England & Wales Births 1837-2006," *Findmypast* ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk); accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Cyril Joseph Smith, District: West Bromwich, County: Staffordshire, Volume: 6B, Page: 861

<sup>15</sup> "England & Wales Births 1837-2006," *Findmypast* ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk); accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Harold Arthur Smith, District: Cannock, County: Staffordshire, Volume: 6B, Page: 651

<sup>16</sup> "GB Historical GIS / University of Portsmouth, Cannock UD through time | Population Statistics | Total Population," *A Vision of Britain through Time* ([http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10136556/cube/TOT\\_POP](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10136556/cube/TOT_POP); accessed 20 April 2017)

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- <sup>18</sup> “1939 Register,” *Findmypast* ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk): accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Frank Smith, Ref: RG101/5386K/017/43, Letter Code: ORKF
- <sup>19</sup> “First World War Camps of Cannock Chase,” *Staffordshire Past Track* ([https://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/indexes\\_search.asp](https://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/indexes_search.asp): accessed 20 April 2017)
- <sup>20</sup> “Soldiers Died in the Great War 1914–1919,” *Findmypast* ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk): accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Charles Smith
- <sup>21</sup> Paul Reed, “9th Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment – WW1,” *Royal Sussex Regiment WW1 Battalions Histories* (<http://battlefields1418.50megs.com/9sussex.htm>: accessed 20 April 2017)
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> “Encouraging Recruits,” *The Observer and West Sussex Recorder*, 24 February 1915, *The British Newspaper Archive* ([www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk): accessed 22 March 2017)
- <sup>24</sup> Tom de Castella, “Bantams: the army units for those under 5ft 3in,” *BBC News Magazine*, 9 February 2015, *BBC News* ([www.bbc.com/news/magazine-31023270](http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-31023270): accessed 6 March 2017)
- <sup>25</sup> “9th Royal Sussex,” *Eastbourne Gazette*, 7 June 1916, *The British Newspaper Archive* ([www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk): accessed 22 March 2017), page 8
- <sup>26</sup> “British Army WW1 Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914–1920,” *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com): accessed 18 February 2017), entry for Charles Smith
- <sup>27</sup> “UK, WW1 War Diaries (France, Belgium and Germany), 1914–1920,” *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com): accessed 13 April 2017), entry for 24th Division, Sub-unit: Royal Sussex Regiment, Piece: 2219/2: 9th Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment (1915 August–1919 May) entry for 3 September 1915
- <sup>28</sup> “Battle of Loos,” *Wikipedia* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Loos](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Loos): accessed 25 April 2017)
- <sup>29</sup> Paul Reed, “9th Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment – WW1,” *Royal Sussex Regiment WW1 Battalions Histories* (<http://battlefields1418.50megs.com/9sussex.htm>: accessed 20 April 2017), Summary of Casualties
- <sup>30</sup> “9th Royal Sussex,” *Eastbourne Gazette*, 7 June 1916, *The British Newspaper Archive* ([www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk): accessed 22 March 2017), page 8
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- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* entry for 15 February 1916
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* entry for 16 February 1916
- <sup>36</sup> “9th Royal Sussex,” *Eastbourne Gazette*, 7 June 1916, *The British Newspaper Archive* ([www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk): accessed 22 March 2017), page 8
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- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* entry for 15 May 1916
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* entry for 28–30 May 1916
- <sup>40</sup> “War Diaries of the First World War: 1st Canadian Casualty Clearing Station 1914/08/13–19/03/31,” *Library and Archives Canada* (<http://data2.collectionscanada.ca/e/e061/e001509279.jpg>: accessed 26 February 2017), entry for May 1916, page 5

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<sup>41</sup> "Record of Deaths, 17 February 1916–10 February 1919, a record maintained at No.1 CCCs," *Library and Archives Canada*, (records accessed 2013 and 2015), Record Group 9, series IIC10, volume 4556, Record number 111

<sup>42</sup> "UK, Army Registers of Soldiers' Effects, 1901–1929," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com): accessed 18 February 2017), entry for Charles Smith

<sup>43</sup> *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* ([www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org): accessed 22 February 2017), entry for C. Smith

<sup>44</sup> "British Army WW1 Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914–1920," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com): accessed 18 February 2017), entry for Charles Smith

<sup>45</sup> "The Story of the Cannock War Monument," *WRYLEYBLOG Local History for the Great Wyrley and Surrounding Area* (<https://wyrleyblog.wordpress.com/cannock/the-story-of-the-cannock-war-memorial/>: accessed 25 April 2017)

<sup>46</sup> "St. George's Chapel," *Royal Sussex Living History Group* ([www.royalsussex.org.uk/sussex-war-memorials/st-georges-chapel](http://www.royalsussex.org.uk/sussex-war-memorials/st-georges-chapel): accessed 25 April 2017)

<sup>47</sup> "9th Royal Sussex," *Eastbourne Gazette*, 7 June 1916, *The British Newspaper Archive* ([www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk): accessed 22 March 2017), page 8

<sup>48</sup> 1939 Register," *Findmypast* ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk): accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Frank Smith, Ref: RG101/5386K/017/43, Letter Code: ORKF

<sup>49</sup> 1939 Register," *Findmypast* ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk): accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Elsie M Mosedale, Ref: RG101/5450D/008/33

<sup>50</sup> 1939 Register," *Findmypast* ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk): accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Harold Arthur Smith, Ref: RG101/0967E/009/20, Letter Code: BXBY