

Edward Benjamin Durnford Brunton Of Walthamstow

He was known as Ben and was born in 1893 at Walthamstow and baptized in St Mary's



Church. He was the only son of Charles Edward Brunton and Kathleen Brabazon Brunton. In 1911, he was employed as a Mercantile Clerk and lived with his family at 19, Church Hill, Walthamstow. At this time, this was one of the most prestigious addresses in Walthamstow and reflected his father's status as a Surgeon.

His father was the son of a Norfolk master plumber from the village of North Elham in Norfolk and his mother was one of the daughters of the Edward Durnford, the Vicar of a smaller nearby Norfolk village called Hildoveston.

In late 1915, Ben, married a local girl from just up the road who, in 1901, lived with her family at 31, Upper Walthamstow Road. She was 19 year old Mabel Annie Phillips, the daughter of businessman Alfred and his

wife Louise Phillips. They married in the local Registry Office at the end of 1915. This, presumably was because he was already in the army and was imminently due to be send to France. We know that on the 3rd May 1915 he is listed in the London Gazette as a temporary 2nd Lieutenant in the Duke of Cambridge's Own (Middlesex Regiment) 17th Battalion (Football) Yes, you read it right. It was a battalion of footballers!

Middlesex Regiment 17th (1st Football) Battalion

Cricket and rugby competitions stopped almost immediately after the outbreak of the First World War. However, the Football League continued with the 1914-15 season. Most football players were professionals and were tied to clubs through one-year renewable contracts. Players could only join the armed forces if the clubs agreed to cancel their contracts.

During the First World War there had been an initial push by clubs for professional football to continue in order to keep the public's spirits up. This stance was not widely agreed with and public opinion turned against professional footballers. One soldier, serving

in France, wrote to a British newspaper to complain that "hundreds of thousands of able-bodied young roughs were watching hirelings playing football" while others were serving their country. The suggestion was even made that King George V should cease being a patron of The Football Association.



Sir Arthur Conan Doyle publicly objected and appealed for footballers to volunteer for service, saying "If a footballer has strength of limb, let them serve and march in the field of battle".

An MP, William Joynson-Hicks formed the Football battalion on 12 December 1914 at Fulham town hall after Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener, suggested it as part of the Pals battalion scheme. England international Frank Buckley became the first player to join, out of thirty players who signed up at its formation. The news of the new Footballer Battalion's formation was announced to the general

public on 1 January 1915.

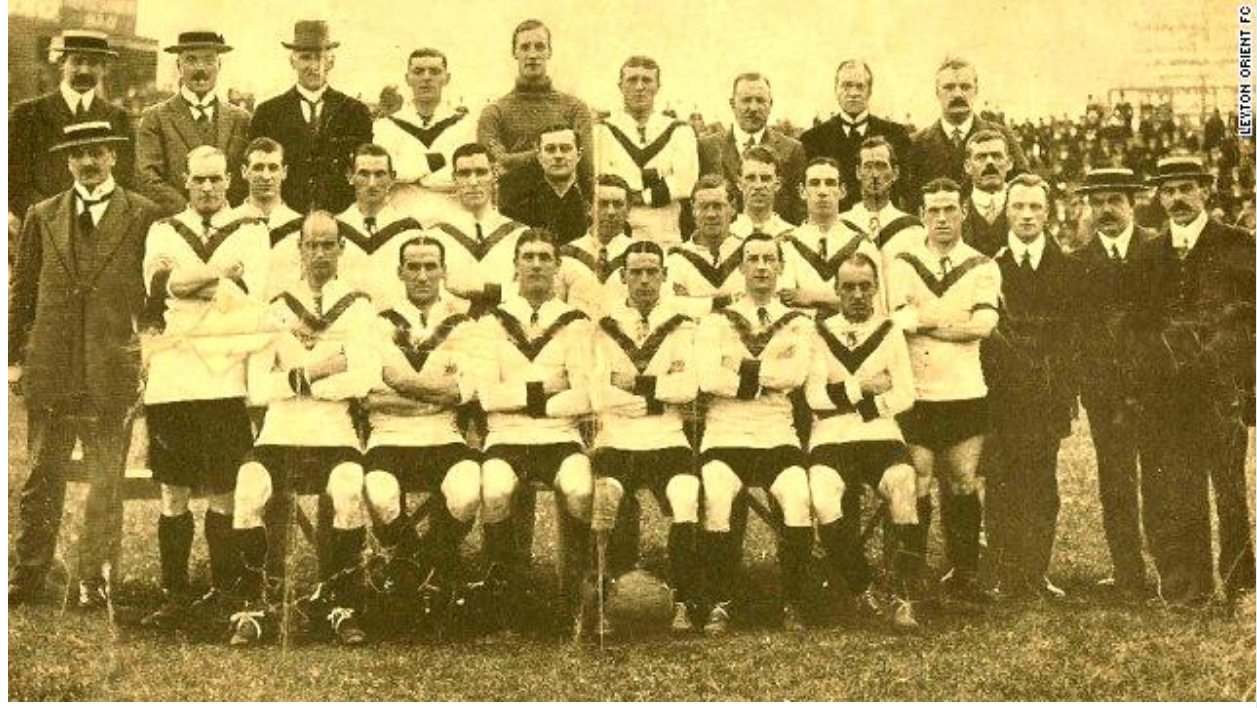
As Frank Buckley had previous experience in the British Army he was given the rank of Lieutenant. He eventually was promoted to the rank of Major. Within a few weeks the 17th Battalion had its full complement of 600 men. However, few of these men were footballers. Most of the recruits were local men who wanted to be in the same battalion as their football heroes. For example, a large number who joined were supporters of Chelsea and Queen's Park Rangers who wanted to serve with Vivian Woodward and Evelyn Lintott.

They trained at White City and moved to Cranleigh in April 1915. They then joined the 100th Brigade, 33rd Division at Clipstone Camp in July and moved to Perham Down for final training in August. From there, they proceeded to France on the 18th of November landing at Boulogne. On the 8th of December they transferred to 6th Brigade, 2nd



Division.

During Army training, the players were allowed leave on a Saturday to return to their clubs to take part in games. However, the clubs found themselves having to subsidise the train fares as the Army did not pay for them.



"Good luck to Clapton Orient FC, no football club had paid a greater price to patriotism" (King George V)

By the following March, 122 professional footballers had signed up for the battalion, which led to press complaints as there were some 1800 eligible footballers. These recruits included the whole of Clapton Orient (later to be known as Leyton Orient) and the

entire Heart of Midlothian team had signed up prior to the formation of the battalion. In addition to footballers, officials and referees also joined the 17th, along with football fans themselves. Many football players deliberately chose to avoid the battalion by joining other regiments, causing the War Office to initially have difficulties filling the battalion.



Walter Tull, Portrait of the newly commissioned officer 1917

Battle Honours

They fought in the Battles of the Somme and the Operations on the Ancre and the battalion suffered heavy losses during the Battle of the Somme, including those at the Battle of Delville Wood and the Battle of Guillemont.

A number of decorations were issued to the soldiers with the battalion. Lyndon Sandoe, of Cardiff City and Wales, was awarded the Distinguished

Conduct Medal with bar, and the Military Medal. Northampton Town's Walter Tull, became the first Black Infantry Officer in the British Army and was recommended for the Military Cross during the war.

In 1917 they were in action during The German retreat to the Hindenburg Line, the Battles of Arras and The Battle of Cambrai. In early 1918 the army was reorganised and on the 10th of February 1918 the 1st Battalion Footballers were disbanded in France with the troops transferring to other units.

During the First World War, the battalion lost more than a thousand men, including 462 in one battle alone at the Battle of Arras in 1917.

They Are Remembered

A memorial to the Football Battalion was unveiled in 2010 in Longueval, France. It was attended by members of the Football Supporters' Federation and representatives of more than 20 clubs. It had been paid for through donations received from football supporters having been promoted by former professional footballer and SAS soldier Phil Stant. The ceremony was conducted by Father Owen Beament of Millwall F.C., and a two-minute silence was started by Gareth Ainsworth.

A granite memorial to the three Clapton Orient players who died in the Battle of the Somme while they were members of the battalion was unveiled in 2011 in Northern France. Over 200 Leyton Orient supporters travelled for the unveiling, which commemorated the lives of Richard McFadden, William Jonas and George Scott.



The (2nd) Battle of the Ancre, 13–18 November 1916

I don't know why Ben Brunton joined the Football Battalion but we know that as a member of the Football Battalion, 2nd Lieutenant Edward Benjamin Durford Brunton, age 23 years, of the Duke of Cambridge's Own (Middlesex Regiment) 17th Battalion (Football) fought and died on the 13th November 1916 on the first day of the 2nd battle of Acre that was the last major British operation of the year.

The Ancre is a river which runs through Albert and then south-east to eventually join the River Somme near Corbie. Further upstream, its course is to the north of Albert, and it runs by the villages of Beaucourt, Authuille and Aveluy. The Ancre gave its name to two of

the final phases of the 1916 Battles of the Somme, designated as the Battle of the Ancre Heights and the Battle of the Ancre (both in November 1916)

The Battle of the Ancre that commenced on the 13th November 1916, was the last major



British operation of the year. The Fifth (formerly Reserve) Army attacked into the Ancre valley to exploit German exhaustion after the Battle of the Ancre Heights and gain

ground ready for a resumption of the offensive in 1917.

Political calculation, concern for Allied morale and Joffre's pressure for a continuation of attacks in France, to prevent German troop transfers to Russia and Italy also influenced the British commander Douglas Haig to again attack at Ancre. The battle began with another mine being detonated beneath Hawthorn Ridge Redoubt and gains were made to the north of the river that included the taking of Beaumont Hamel.

Major Frank Buckley kept a record of what happened to the men under his command. He later wrote that by the mid-1930s over 500 of the battalion's original 600 men were dead, having either been killed in action or dying from wounds suffered during the fighting.

Afterword

Mabel Annie Phillips was married for less than a year and she was made a widow at the age of 23 years. She never married again and died in 1968 at Watford aged 76 years.

Bill Bayliss
November 2014

Some sources used in this article:

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The picture of **Edward Benjamin Durford Brunton** by courtesy of **Georgianna Birch Thurber**