

John Pope Age 29

There were two men called John Pope associated with the village at the time of WW1. One was the son of George Pope and survived the war. He worked for the Langport and Somerton Herald and served with the Grenadier Guards.

The John Pope recorded on the war memorial was with a Gloucestershire Regiment and is most likely the son of John and Mary Ann Pope. He was born on 22nd August 1888 and baptised at Holy Trinity. He joined William, Francis, Arthur, Alice, Louisa and Gertrude and was followed five years later by Bessie. Their father, John Pope, is recorded in the census as a labourer.

Like many men living here, John Pope Snr moved, albeit briefly, from Somerset in search of better work; the family lived in South Wales for several years during the late 1870s. Arthur and Alice were born in Maesteg, the other children being born in Long Sutton.

By 1901, Mary was a widow, living in New Street and working as a washerwoman. Only John and Bessie were still with her. Francis (29) had moved to Portland, working as a labourer and Arthur (25) was back in Maesteg, working in mining (living as a boarder in the same house as Albert Chislett of Long Load). Gertrude (17) was working as a servant at Long Sutton Vicarage. Although John was only 12, he is listed as already working as an agricultural labourer.

Some when between 1901 and 1911, John migrated to South Wales, initially perhaps to join his brother at a colliery. However, by the 1911 census he had joined the police force and was living in the station house at Pontypridd.

John is recorded as enlisting at Cinderford in Gloucestershire and by the time of his death he was a Sergeant. He joined the Gloucestershire 13th Battalion, (Forest of Dean). This was a specialist pioneer unit and its role included digging trenches, wiring and building encampments for other troops, as well as ordinary infantry work. The unit tended to recruit miners, labourers, transport workers, anyone used to hard manual labour. They would earn two pence a day more than the average infantryman.

The Pioneers landed in France in 1916 with the primary task of building and repairing roads and trenches in the forward areas. Their first major action was a diversionary attack just before the start of the Battle of the Somme and they fought through the summer and autumn of the Somme battles of 1916. In 1917, the battalion took part in the Passchendaele Offensive and were in the 'Salient' throughout the entire autumn, steadily losing men through enemy action and sickness.

During the German Offensive of March 1918, the Pioneers suffered over 300 killed, wounded and missing. They had been preparing fortifications behind the lines when the long-expected German attack broke. It was probably then that John Pope was killed in action on 25th March at the age of 29.

After a week of digging trenches, fighting rear guard actions and withdrawing, those who had survived were collected together and sent on to Ypres. On the 26th April, most of them were cut off and taken prisoner by a German attack south of Ypres. Their losses were so great by then that they were pulled out of the line.

John Pope is commemorated on the Pozieres Memorial, about six kilometres from Albert, France.