

Jesse Westlake Age 24

William Jesse Westlake was born in Long Sutton on 12th June 1892 and baptised on 7th August 1892, at Holy Trinity. He was the second child of Frederick William and Sarah Westlake who lived in Shute lane. Frederick worked as an agricultural labourer and Sarah is listed in the 1891 census as a silk glover. Jesse had two sisters, Ida born in 1890 and Eva in 1896.

By 1911, Ida had left home and Jesse was working as a carter on a farm.

Jesse was a Gunner in the Royal Field Artillery and his medal record indicates that he was enlisted in September 1915. The horse-drawn RFA was responsible for the medium calibre guns and howitzers deployed close to the front line and in very mobile units. Jesse was with the "B" Battery, 76th Brigade, at the time of his death and the brigade was in action in France in the Somme during the summer of 1916. The front line was advancing, with heavy casualties during early September, leading up to the Battle of Flers-Courcelette on 15th September.

Jesse was wounded on the 8th September and was probably taken to one of the three casualty clearing stations at Heilly, about 10 km from the town of Albert. He died of wounds four days later at the age of 24 and is buried at Heilly cemetery.

There were three Casualty Clearing Station at Heilly and the cemetery was used by all three from May 1916 until April 1917. Almost 3000 men are buried or commemorated there, but the burials were carried out under extreme pressure. Many of the graves are either too close together to be marked individually, or they contain multiple burials. Some headstones carry as many as three sets of casualty details.

The Matron-in-Chief, British Expeditionary Force, France and Flanders made an inspection visit to the Casualty Clearing Stations (CCS) at Heilly a few days after Jesse Westlake had died there. She described the conditions there in her war diary:

20th September 1916

From there to Heilly, where I stayed at 36 CCS. The arrangements here are first-rate, and they have ample accommodation in the operating theatres and in the huge dressing marquees for dressing large numbers of walking cases quite easily. Improvised cupboards and shelves and dressing table placed in position, all in readiness for dressing large numbers of wounded at any moment. A certain number of seriously wounded Germans in marquees set apart for them, looked after by orderlies, the night sister visiting. The Officers' accommodation here is very good indeed, and also the marquees which are specially set apart for abdominal and gas cases.

21st September 1916

Went round 38 CCS which is just next to 36. Everything going smoothly, - rain still descending. In the operating theatre where some men about to be operated on who had been out for 4 days, and their condition was wonderful; they were most uncomplaining. The nursing arrangements here were giving entire satisfaction.