Albert Bowcher Dyer

Service Record

- **Albert Bowcher Dyer** was the first person from the parish to enlist to serve in the war. He attested and joined the 8th Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment on 26th August 1914 aged 21 as Private 10615. The 8th (Service) Battalion was formed at Exeter as part of the First New Army and then moved to Rushmoor Camp, Aldershot as part of the 14th Division. Training was carried out Aldershot and then Farnham. Back at Aldershot, the Battalion was mobilised for war and landed at Le Havre on 26 July 1915, and transferred to the 20th Brigade of the 7th Division, which engaged in various actions on the Western Front including the first Battle of Loos in 1915.

- **Albert Bowcher** was severely wounded at Loos on 25 September 1915, when the 8th Devons suffered heavy casualties in the first wave of attacks towards Hulloch. Caught in a burst of machine gunfire, he was seriously wounded in the thigh by bullets and shrapnel. Bullets shattered his water bottle and one bullet tore off a button from his tunic. He was rescued and taken back to base, and from there to the Royal Herbert Hospital at Woolwich, where his mother visited him. He underwent four operations, but passed away on 2 November while still under anaesthetic from the fourth operation.

- His body was conveyed to Kingsbridge station, and then taken by the 7th Battalion of the Devonshires to the church at Thurlestone, where it was received by the Rector, Rev Coope, and rested in the church overnight before burial on the Saturday afternoon. He was given a funeral with full military honours, attended by a detachment of 30 men of the 7th Devons under Captain H Hems. There was a large attendance of parishioners and others from the surrounding district, many of whom were unable to find space inside the church.

- During the service the Rector gave a short address, taking as his text *"Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends"*. He pointed out that this was the first military funeral that had ever taken place in Thurlestone churchyard during the 800 years of its existence. The favourite hymn of Private Dyer, "Lead kindly light" was sung during the service. A volley was fired at the graveside by the men of the 7th Battalion, and the bugler sounded the "Last Post".

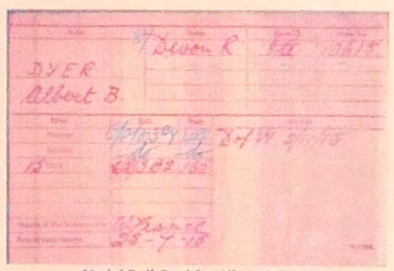
- This was perhaps rather special treatment for a private soldier, but it may have somewhat influenced by the letter which had been sent shortly beforehand by His Majesty King George V via the Keeper of the Privy Purse to his mother, **Mrs Julia Dyer** of West Buckland, which read:

  "I am commanded by the King to convey to you an expression of His Majesty's appreciation of the patriotic spirit which has prompted your five sons to give their services at the present time to the Army and Navy. The King was much gratified to hear of the manner in which they have so readily responded to the call of their Sovereign and their country, and I am to express to you and to them His Majesty's congratulations on having contributed in so full a measure to the great cause for which all the people of the British Empire are so bravely fighting."

- The eldest son, **William Henry**, had been a regular in the Royal Navy since 1893; second son **Francis Arthur John** was serving in the Royal Engineers: fourth son **Alfred Ernest** was a stoker on HMS *Warspite*; fifth son **Thomas Bernard** and sixth son **Frederick Charles** had both followed their brothers into the Royal Navy, while the seventh, **George Cuthbert**, was at Greenwich Hospital School, the cradle of the Navy, from which he too would go on to join the senior service.

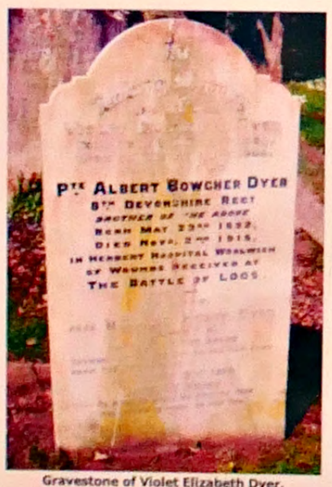
- It was a remarkable record of service, justly recognised by the King's letter, and with Private **Albert Bowcher Dyer's** funeral fittingly accorded full military honours by the Devonshire Regiment.

Badge of the Devonshire Regiment



Medal Roll Card for Albert B Dyer

Medals awarded to Albert Bowcher Dyer



Gravestone of Violet Elizabeth Dyer,
Albert Bowcher Dyer,
and William Henry Dyer

Battle of Loos

- The 8th and 9th Battalions of the Devonshire Regiment featured prominently in this battle, and both **Private Albert Bowcher Dyer** and **Lieutenant Jack Inchbald** were in the thick of it. An overview of the battle in Wikipedia reads:

  "The battle opened on 25 September 1915. In many places British artillery had failed to cut the German wire in advance of the attack. Advancing over open fields within range of German machine guns and artillery, British losses were devastating. However, the British were able to break through the weaker German defences and capture the town of Loos, mainly due to numerical superiority. The inevitable communications and supply problems, combined with the late arrival of reserves, meant that the breakthrough could not be exploited."

- An accompanying photo provides a glimpse of the action, and evokes the thought that any one of these blurred figures could be **Private Albert Bowcher Dyer** walking forward to his fate.

British infantry advancing through gas at Loos, 25 September 1915.

- *The Devonshire Regiment 1914-1918* by C T Atkinson reflects:

  "Hard hit both battalions had certainly been. The 8th had 19 officers and 620 men in their casualty list, and it was even more in the quality than in the quantity of their losses that they had suffered so much. To lose so many of the officers and NCOs who had borne the brunt of the work of raising and training the new battalion, was a shattering blow.

  Still the 8th and 9th could look with pride on their first battle. At that period in the war few other battalions could boast of having captured German guns.

  It was a notable achievement for a new battalion and an earnest of fine things to come. It spoke well for the battalion's training and for the spirit by which it was inspired that, when nearly all their officers had fallen with so many of the men, the survivors should have carried on the attack with such vigour and resolution. One survivor wrote: *" The men were simply splendid, as steady as veterans; they neither flinched nor grumbled the whole time, though they were cold, hungry and tired to death, as well as wet to the skin."*

  All that was clear was that the two Service battalions of the Devons had borne themselves worthily, in a way which befitted the Regiment from which they had sprung, and had shown themselves fully entitled to a place in the hard-fighting Division to which they had been allotted.

  Two of the guns taken by the Devons at Loos were presented by the War Office to the County of Devon, and were formally handed over to the Lord Lieutenant (Earl Fortescue) and by him entrusted to the Mayor and Corporation of Exeter for safe custody."

- Of the severe losses suffered by the two Devon Battalions at Loos it is not recorded how many were buried with with full military honours, but **Private Albert Bowcher Dyer's** funeral at Thurlestone must have been a very rare event - if not indeed unique. Perhaps it was the Regiment's tribute to **all** the men they lost in that action.

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