

EDMUND BLUNDEN, FRANK HOAD AND FRANK WORLEY



The death of Frank Hoad on 3 September 1916 was just another of the sacrifices men made of themselves at the Battle of the Somme, but he and his comrade Frank Worley may be unique.

Writers of that war left innumerable accounts of their anonymous comrades' sufferings and deaths. No doubt they wanted to protect readers who might have been related to the casualty concerned. The exception, in this case at least, was the poet Edmund Blunden (1896-1974), who was to be awarded the MC when a temporary Second Lieutenant in 1917. In his poem *Pillbox* he names Hoad and Worley. The poem follows, with Blunden's annotation stating when and where it was written:¹

PILLBOX

[Sept. 29, 1917. Tower Hamlets,
Amenia Rd.]

Just see what's happening, Worley.—Worley rose
And round the angled doorway thrust his nose,
And Sergeant Hoad went, too, to snuff the air.
Then war brought down his fist, and missed the pair!
Yet Hoad was scratched by a splinter, the blood came,
And out burst terrors that he'd striven to tame,
A good man, Hoad, for weeks. *I'm blown to bits.*
He groans, he screams. *Come, Bluffer, where's your wits?*
Says Worley. *Bluffer, you've a blighty, man!*
All in the pillbox urged him, here began
His freedom: *Think of Eastbourne and your dad.*
The poor man lay at length and brief and mad
Flung out his cry of doom; soon ebbed and dumb
He yielded. Worley with a tot of rum
And shouting in his face could not restore him.
The ship of Charon over channel bore him.
All marvelled even on that most deathly day
To see this life so spirited away.

Frank Albert Hoad was a Sergeant in 11th Battalion, The Royal Sussex Regiment. Unusually for men of that period – many records were destroyed or damaged by enemy action in the Second World War – we have his full military record. He had been born at Battle in 1889, and enlisted at Eastbourne on 9 September 1914, giving his occupation as a farmer, as did his father. He was unmarried (and remained so). His medical examination described him as 5' 10¼" tall (just under 1.8 metres) and his weight as 165 lb, or 11 stone and 11 lbs (76.2 kg); he had black hair, hazel eyes and a ruddy complexion. He gave his religion as Church of England. He clearly attracted the attention of the officers, for he was promoted Corporal on 23 December. In the summer of 1915, still in England, he was granted leave to go haymaking for just under a month. Sent to France on 2 March 1916, after some illness in April he was promoted Lance Sergeant on 3 July and full Sergeant on 14 July.

The scene of Hoad's death was typical of the war: a major attack against almost impossible odds, with the second and third waves facing an impassable barrage of shells. The battle was immediately above the northern bank of the river Ancre and its marshes, and a little north-east of the village of Hamel. Hoad's battalion was part of the 116th Division, which made initial gains but was pressed back. It must have been in the withdrawal that he died.²



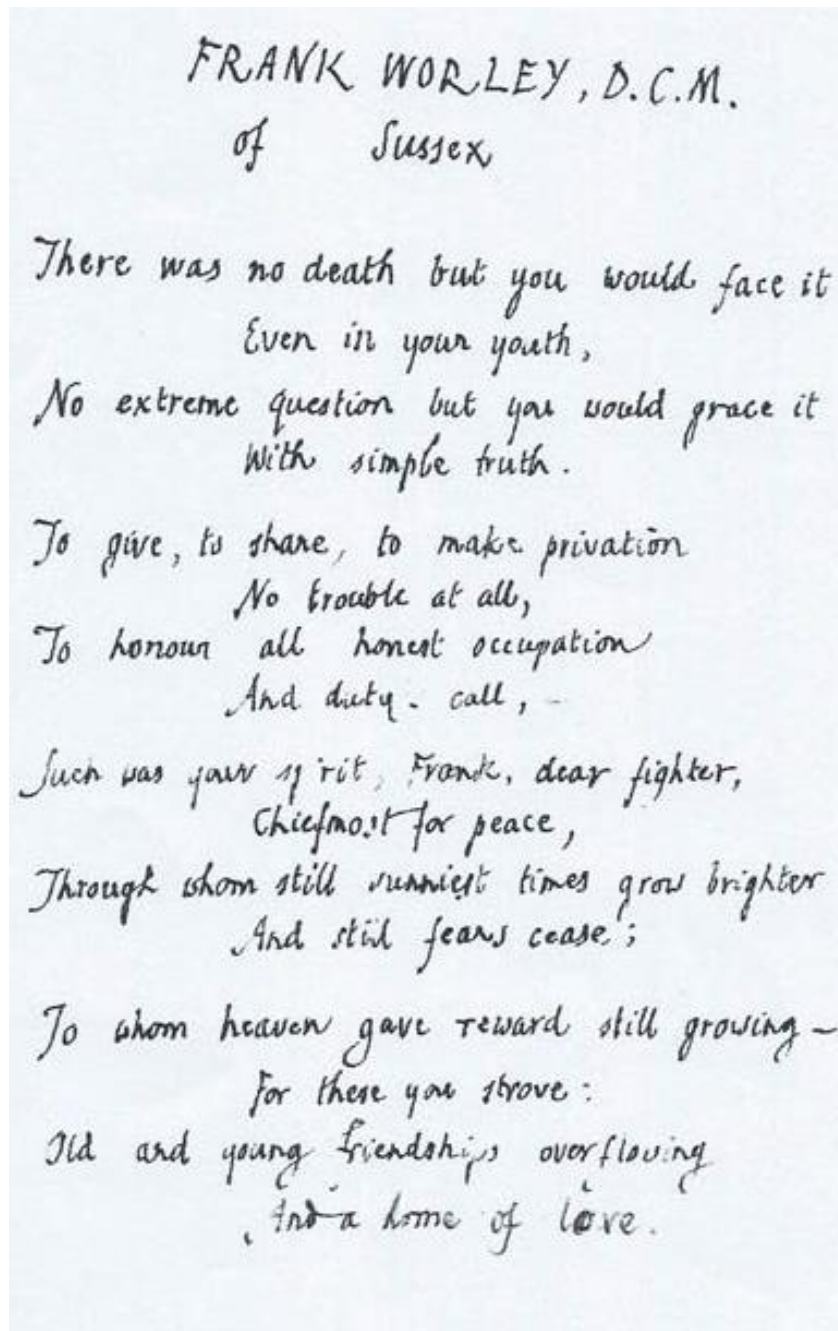
The German front line of 3 September 1916 was along the ridge shown in this photograph, viewed from Ancre British Cemetery, Hamel.³

Hoad was clearly seen to die, and not in such a way that his body was destroyed; but he has no known grave. The authorities presumed him dead at once, which suggests that information was given that he had died. The inference must be that his body was lost in the immediately subsequent fighting. Presumably the men with him were forced to withdraw, taking with them some articles later returned to his father: some letters, a pocket case, a wristwatch and strap, a prayer book and a pipe. Hoad's name is on the Thiepval Memorial.

The Hoad family was somewhat peripatetic, and their presence in the public records is decidedly confusing. Hoad's father Nelson was from Herstmonceux and in 1918 was at Little Lulhams Farm, Ripe (where the war memorial commemorates Frank). His mother was Mary Ann Matilda Luxford (1862-1923), born to a farming family at Rotherfield. In the censuses

the family were at Mephams Farm (off the road between Horam and Cross in Hand, then at Stream Farm immediately north of Horam by the Heathfield road, and at Rose Bank nearby. In the last case, 1911, Frank was at Paine's farm just east of Horam.

The various marriages and children, however, are distinctly unclear. All we can say for certainty is that Nelson died in the Battle area in 1939; his mother Mary Ann died at Brighton early in 1923; Frank's brother Herbert died in 1965, with his address being at the Arundel Arms. This pub by Ford station closed in 2005 and is now a care home. Another brother, Cyril, died at Bexhill in 1923. Herbert had children; Cyril did not.



Worley continued in service. He was wounded in 1917, and Blunden recommended him for a VC: he was given the DCM. He was discharged at the end of 1918, suffering from shellshock. He had been a butcher at Worthing but perhaps wisely moved to become a fishmonger. He died in 1954; he has descendants. The interesting thing is the way that despite differences of class and education the war brought some people close together: Worley and Blunden stayed in touch, and at Worley's death he wrote the poem above in his memory.

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¹ *Pillbox*, by Blunden, Edmund (1896-1974). The Edmund Blunden Literary Estate via First World War Poetry Digital Archive, <http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/9063>.

² Information on the battle from Neil Clephane-Cameron.

³ Photograph by Neil Clephane-Cameron, 2016.