

Name, Rank & Regiment of Soldier:

**Berry, Thomas Letts**

Corporal 3<sup>rd</sup> Sherwood Foresters

(sent to serve alongside 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion)

Number: 17480



Date of birth	Date died of wounds	Age
March 14 <sup>th</sup> 1880	March 13 <sup>th</sup> 1915	34

#### Background: **Thomas Letts Berry**

Leicestershire-born<sup>1</sup> Thomas Letts Berry was a barley merchant. He was married to Collingham-born Mary Alissamon<sup>2</sup> Kirk (1877-1949) at All Saints Church, Collingham, in June 1905. They had a son, Thomas Hugh Kirk Berry (1912- 2000) who was 18 months old when his father died. The 1908 trade directory (Kelly's) lists Thomas Letts Berry under 'Private Residents' although the 1911 census shows him with Mary at his parents' home in Ashley, Northants. Son Thomas Hugh was baptised at All Saints Church in 1912.

<sup>1</sup> 1911 Census returns state he was born in Slawston, Leics.

<sup>2</sup> Spelt in various ways on ETG website –Allisimon, Alissimon etc

Mary (baptised All Saints, North Collingham in 1876) was the daughter of David Kirk, a maltster of Crescent House, Low Street, N Collingham, and Elizabeth Kirk. Mary Berry died in 1949 aged 72. She lived in 'The Pleasaunce' on Swinderby Road<sup>3</sup> and is buried in All Saints' Churchyard. There is also a window dedicated to her in the church.



*Above: Ashley Manor, where Thomas and his siblings grew up. Photo kindly supplied by Margaret Richold of Ashley Village Archive Group 2017*

### **Military History: Corporal Thomas Letts Berry**

Thomas Letts Berry started out with the Nottingham City Battalion before being transferred to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sherwood Foresters. By the end of his training in Plymouth he had been promoted to corporal. His battalion left Plymouth on March 6<sup>th</sup><sup>4</sup> 1915.

**Neuve Chapelle (March 10<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> 1915)**

<sup>3</sup> East Trent Genealogy & 1916 trade directory. The Pleasaunce is now called Swinderby Lodge.

<sup>4</sup> Newark Advertiser Obituary, April 21<sup>st</sup> 1915

Corporal Berry had only been in France for five days when he was shot and later died of wounds. However, it wasn't inexperience that led to his death. Despite only lasting three days the fighting in Neuve Chapelle, a village near the Belgian border of northern France, was a bloody and fierce encounter that claimed thousands of lives. In all, 7,000 men from the British Forces were killed or wounded and 4,200 from the Indian Army and about 10,000 from the German side.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Sherwood Foresters [whom the 3<sup>rd</sup> were drafted in to support] were part of the 24<sup>th</sup> Brigade under Brigadier General F C Carter with Sir Douglas Haig in overall command of the British forces. Poor communications between Allied Command caused mass confusion in the command chain, leading to swathes of men being told to advance towards what was almost certain death.

Another Sherwood Forester, Private Jacob Rivers (34) of Derby, was awarded the Victoria Cross for his role in the same battle. It is on display in the Sherwood Foresters Museum at Nottingham Castle. Rivers was also killed at Neuve Chapelle.

## Tributes

The following extracts are from Trevor Frecknall's 'Collingham During the Great War' p 40

'Friday 19 March 1915: Mrs Mary Alissimon Berry, at home in North Collingham with her two-year-old son, was desperate to discover how her husband was. Thomas Letts Berry, 34, the sixth son of the Lord of the Manor<sup>5</sup> of Ashley in Northamptonshire, was a highly respected corn merchant, lent the grounds adjoining his residence for the annual Collingham Horticultural Society Show<sup>6</sup>, was an active supporter of the Conservative and Unionist Association and a prominent member of the Collingham Habitation of the Primrose League. Devoted though he was to his young family, he had had no second thought about forsaking his comfortable life in response to Lord Kitchener's poster appeal: 'Your Country Needs You'. But Thomas had been in France with the 1<sup>st</sup> Sherwoods for only five days before he was severely wounded. All Mary had been told, though, was that Thomas had been shot above the heart. The information came from one of his comrades in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Sherwoods (part of 'the New Army'). The comrade added that Thomas had the satisfaction of knowing he had bowled over six Germans before being hit himself; and he was "very cheerful". But Mrs Berry was concerned that she had had no official indication of the seriousness of the wound and hoped that further particulars might soon arrive...'

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<sup>5</sup> This is an error. Thomas's parents lived in The Manor House in Ashley from about 1885 to 1916 (when his father Robert died) but Robert Berry was not 'Lord of the Manor' as such. Source: Margaret Richold of Ashley History Society 2017.

<sup>6</sup> This was possibly the current playing field on Swinderby Road or land nearby but confirmation needed of this.

**'Friday 16 April 1915:** Mary Alissimon Berry finally heard the news she had been fearing. Her dearly loved husband Thomas was killed at Neuve Chapelle. The longer the ominous silence had lasted, the more concerned she had become; and confirmation of the worst news was contained in a telegram from the War Office. He died on 13 March, the day after he was shot. Corporal 17480 Berry is remembered in the Estaires Communal Cemetery and Extension, 10km west of Armentieres.'

**Corporal Thomas Letts**

**Berry was buried in Estaires Communal Cemetery, Neuve Chapelle. He died the day before his 35<sup>th</sup> birthday.**

- ❶ **He is also remembered on North Collingham War Memorial Cross in All Saints' Churchyard**
- ❷ **The Parishioners' Plaque, All Saints, Collingham**
- ❸ **The dedicated stained glass window in All Saints Church unveiled on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1918**
- ❹ **Ashley's War memorial in St Mary's Church, where a plaque was unveiled and dedicated to him on Remembrance Sunday 2017 and on an inscription on his parents grave in Ashley Churchyard.**



The window dedicated to T L Berry in All Saints Church  
Photo Courtesy J Lodge





**Above: photo of plaque to Thomas Letts Berry in St Mary's Church, Ashley, c/o Margaret Richold**

The following additional information on Thomas Letts Berry and the action at Neuve Chapelle has kindly been supplied by Ros Gallant and Margaret Richold of Ashley Village Archive Group. Go to Ashley Village website ([www.ashleyvillage.co.uk](http://www.ashleyvillage.co.uk)) for further details.

### **A Doctor's Experience at Neuve Chapelle– Ambulance work under fire**

(From the Market Harborough Advertiser, March 30<sup>th</sup> 1915).

The following is taken from the letter of an officer in the R.A.M.C who was present at Neuve Chapelle: -

*It has been quite impossible to write lately, as there has been a tremendous battle on, the earlier parts of which was a great success, but the Germans have brought up immense reserves and have checked farther advance, so far, as they have concentrated heavy artillery here.*

*Life has been absolute Hell; there is no other word for it. My dates may be shaky as I lost count of everything, but on the night of the 9<sup>th</sup> I was sent to an advanced dressing post half-mile behind the trenches to be ready for the attack next day. At 7 a.m. on the 10<sup>th</sup> our guns*

*opened fire, straight over our heads, and for an hour you could not hear a word spoken. The German reply was feeble as they had been surprised.*

*At 8 a.m. the attack started, and what few Germans were left alive quickly surrendered. About 10 a.m. casualties began to pour in, but at 12 I had urgent orders to go to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Rifle Brigade in Neuve Chapelle. From that time onwards it is almost impossible to describe things. I have had a wonderful experience of modern battle – seen Germans trying to rush the trench we were in and falling back by the hundreds; seen them giving themselves up as prisoners and being hauled into our trench; have dressed German wounds (and been offered money for it afterwards!).*

*They are in an appalling state of terror when they arrive. I have seen our men alas! Trying to rush across an open space and falling by dozens under maxim fire, and have had the most appalling shower of shells over our heads for three days, bursting quite close at times in the trench and killing men at one's elbow. There has been wonderful heroism everywhere, and almost everybody deserves the V.C. I think.*



**Above: British casualties in a German trench at Neuve Chapelle**

*Getting the wounded away was the worst. I had only four stretcher-bearers out of 16 and only two stretchers; and the shell fire was so great that it was impossible to carry them to the ambulance a mile and a half away, so we had to manage as best we could in Neuve Chapelle for nearly 36 hours where there is literally*

*not a roof left. At last things quietened down a bit, but many wounded had to be brought in between the firing lines – dangerous work as both sides are liable to fire if they see you.*

*We are in old German trenches, very insanitary – washing is almost impossible. For two days I could not wash my hands. We have now been under fire and shell for five days. I am writing this in a five-foot cellar, all that remains of a house, German Headquarters I should think.*

## Sources

T Frecknall: Collingham and district in The Great War pub. 2015

Ashley Village Archive Group

East Trent Genealogy database

Nottinghamshire County Council Roll of Honour database

Ancestry.co.uk

