

Louis Ackroyd – World War 1 War Hero (1891 to 1915)

Louis Ackroyd was born on 18 August 1891 to Dan Ackroyd (a wool mill mechanic), and Mary Jane Ackroyd nee Schofield, who were living at the Popeley Buildings, Millbridge, Liversedge in Yorkshire. Louis was baptised at George Street Congregational Chapel in Heckmondwike on 27th September 1891. The couple had 9 other children.

Louis took his elementary training at Millbridge National School in Liversedge near Heckmondwike. He then transferred to Heckmondwike Secondary School in 1903 and was considered “*one of the finest lads the Heckmondwike School had turned out*”. He was loyal to his school and his house (Clark). He was a thorough sportsman who always “played the game” keenly and fairly and threw his whole soul into it. He was exceedingly popular with all his school mates and the staff. He was the seventh “old boy” to fall in the war out of 200 in the ranks.

Louis excelled and won the Maintenance Scholarship in 1905 and in 1909 a County Major Scholarship to attend Leeds University for three years. His parents and three of his five siblings were living at 17 Rydal Terrace, Jeremy Lane when his father, Dan Ackroyd, died in 1911.

From 1919 to 1921 he took studied for a B.Sc. degree in Chemistry at Leeds University and was awarded a second class honours. He was amongst a number of Heckmondwike Old Scholars who travelled daily by train to the University. The effect of Louis’ studies at Leeds University was that his younger brother and my Grandfather, Charles Ackroyd, was not able to go on to higher education himself. This was simply because Dan and his wife May Jane could not afford to put both boys through University at the same time. This had an impact on the life chances of Charles, but ironically led to the early death of Louis, because his degree in Chemistry led him to enlist in the Royal Engineers and this in turn led to him being killed in 1915 in World War 1.

Louis was a versatile sportsman who captained Leeds University at football, cricket and lacrosse. Louis then won a place at Manchester University for one year where he gained his post graduate Teaching Diploma (division 2) in 1913 He toured Germany, Austria and Hungary in May 1913 with a Northern Universities football team. The played five games over a fortnight drawing 3 times (2-2 and 1-1 twice, in Budapest, Liesig and Magdeburg respectively) wining 6-1 in Hungary and losing 1-0 in Agram. Louis was reportedly a footballer of some considerable ability and his form as captain and centre-half for the Leeds University football team and subsequently as a fresher for the Manchester University 1st team, resulted in him being considered as having the potential to “*develop into a really class player*”.



The above is a picture of Leeds University football team from 1913. Louis Ackroyd is in the centre of the back row and has not got a team blazer on.

After securing his Teachers Diploma, (Div. 2) in 1913, Louis taught at Heckmondwike Secondary School for a year followed by a move to Rastrick Grammar School where he was an assistant Master and much loved.

By the summer of 1915 the Territorials and the first of Kitchener's New Army divisions were beginning to arrive in France in strength and plans were made for a major British attack to be launched at Loos at the end of September. However the first use of poison gas by the Germans occurred in late April 1915. The British therefore rapidly decided to follow suit and formed special gas companies of the Royal Engineers and sought to recruit graduate chemists, physicists and technicians from industry to carry out this new form of warfare. In late May 1915, an effort therefore began to find men with training in chemistry. They were enlisted into the Chemical Corps and immediately given the rank of Corporal. They were recruited for the duration of war and aged between 19 and 45. Such was the urgency, the recruits were permitted to fall outside the normal height and weight limits for the Army as long as they were otherwise fit. Initially 21 graduate chemists who were already serving in the Army were found and approved by Sir Alfred Keogh, Director of Medical Services. They landed at Le Havre on 15 May 1915 in the SS Normania. This was a passenger vessel which was requisitioned as a troop ship by the Admiralty. It was subsequently destroyed at Dunkirk in World War two.



Corporal Louis Ackroyd is pictured above in his Army uniform in 1915. RIP.

The men who were recruited to the Chemical Corps were paid two shillings and sixpence per day plus sixpence corps pay, and would qualify for separation allowance for dependents. After a recruit presented himself locally, he would be directed to the Central Recruiting Office at Great Scotland Yard in London for completion of the procedure. Men who were already serving under regular army terms could be transferred, but those who were in the

Territorial Force or Special Reserve would technically have to be discharged and then re-enlisted for this service.

On 26 May 1915, Major Charles Howard Foulkes RE was appointed as a gas advisor to General Headquarters in France, having previously been in command of 11th Field Company. It was largely due to his efforts that the organisation developed, and he was eventually formally made commanding officer of the Special Brigade and on 17 June 1917 the GHQ Director of Gas Services. In the latter role he replaced Colonel (Temporary Major-General) Henry Fleetwood Thuillier. By 30 July 1915, 400 men had joined. Of these, 274 were enlisted and 126 transferred in from other regiments. Louis joined a little later.

Apparently, Corporal Ackroyd was amongst those who responded to a letter received from the War Office asking for young men with experience in Chemistry to enlist. Obviously Louis had graduated two years previously with a degree in Chemistry, so he was an obvious candidate for the recruitment drive and it would have been presented as an exciting and ground breaking opportunity for Louis to do his duty and at the same time put his degree to good use.

During the August bank holiday in 1915, Louis answered this call and enlisted in the Chemical Corps of the Royal Engineers (189th Field Company or Special Company). He wanted to make a difference. This was one of the first Companies to be formed. He was given the standard starting rank of Corporal (instead of Private). So, Louis was part of a brand-new specialist Corps which had a very important role in the British Army, albeit that the use of gas at the Front was a very ghastly development. The British Army had no choice but to respond in kind, otherwise its soldiers would inevitably have been overwhelmed and slaughtered by the German Army's fearful new initiative.

Corporal Louis Ackroyd (106514) was posted to France by the Monday after the Bank Holiday break, which was an incredible fast deployment. On 25 September 1915, the companies of the Chemical Corps (including Lois Ackroyd) were engaged in the first British Army offensive release of poison gas, at the start of the Battle of Loos. The picture on the next page shows the desolate and devastated frontline at the Battle of Loos. Not a tree is standing. The landscape consists of an endless sea of churned up mud.

Louis took an active part in the severe initial fighting and he came through this without receiving any injury. This despite being in the front line, at times as close as 200 yards from the German positions. He was one of those who had to prepare the way for the infantry by the use of gas. One can only wonder how Louis coped with such a brutal baptism of fire, blood, gore and death, having had little or no training and even less time to become used to and hardened to his new life in the British Army.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

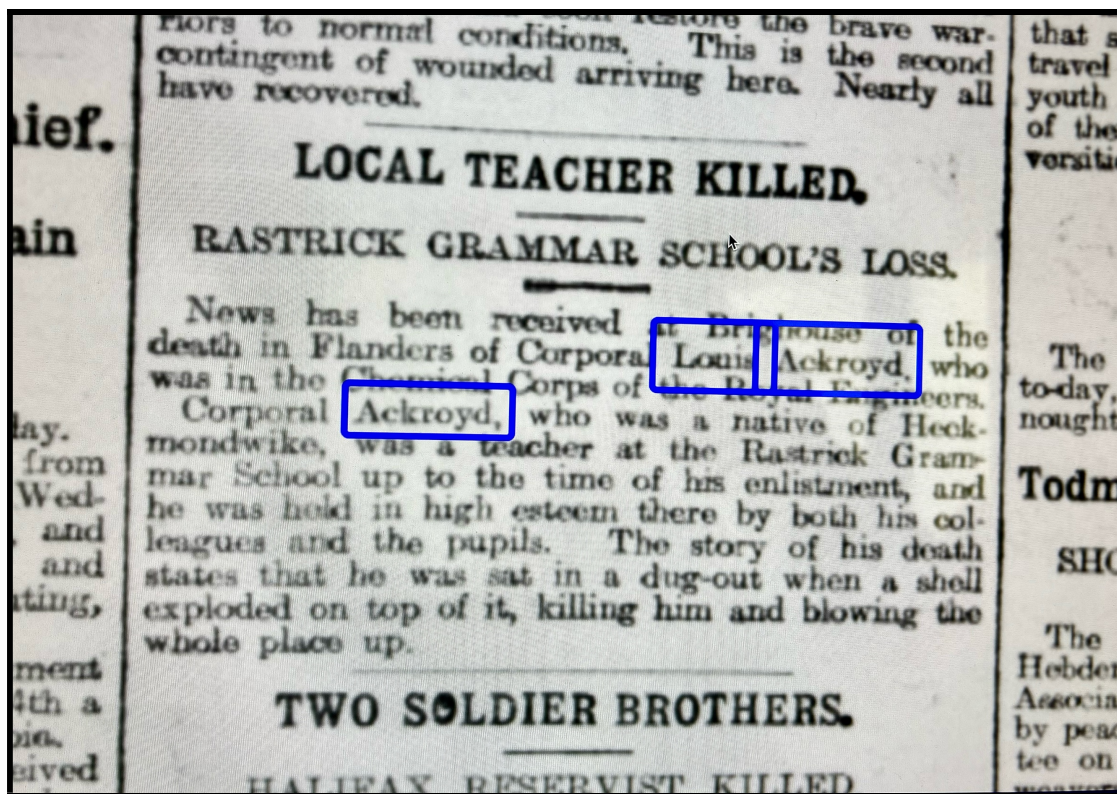
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A panorama of Loos, showing on the left the road leading to Crucifix Dump. In the centre of the picture is Loos Crassier with Hill 70 in the background is Fosse 121, Cite St. Pierre.

In his last letter home to his mother at 12 Rydal Terrace, in Jeremy Lane, written on 1st October 1915, Corporal Ackroyd said:

"We went into the trenches last Friday night, September 25th, and stayed there until the next morning. We were right in the front line, about 200 yards from the Germans. They were extremely quiet throughout the night but at dawn they gave us it hot. Luckily no one in our section was hit. After we had finished our little job the infantry mounted the parapet and charged the German trenches gaining a great victory and breaking through as you will have seen from the papers. Since then I have been up to the trenches every day, which means a five mile walk each way. Today we were marching up as usual when the Germans started shelling the road. A shell burst within 25 yards of us but no one was hurt. I have a piece of the shell. It was too dangerous for our work so we marched back."

Two days later, on Sunday 3 October 1915, while Louis was sitting in what was thought to be a safe position, with some fellow soldiers outside a billet (or possibly in a dugout according to his Army records), a stray shell burst nearby about 10 yards away. A shrapnel splinter hit Louis in the neck causing injuries from which he died in hospital later that same night. He was just 24. He had his whole life in front of him and it was brutally cut short. Unbelievably, he had only been in the Army for eight weeks! Most new recruits would have barely started their initial training in this timescale. His death was sheer bad luck, tragic and utterly truly heart rending.



Above is an initial local press record indicating that Corporal Louis Ackroyd had been killed in Flanders. Official confirmation followed a few days later. The intervening period must have been hellish for Louis's loved ones.

The Royal Engineers reported the loss of three officers (1 suffering from gas, 1 wounded, 2 missing) and 149 other ranks (21 killed, 1 died of wounds, 72 suffering from gas, 15 missing, 39 wounded, 1 wounded and missing and believed killed). Louis must have been one of these casualties. A second gas attack was made later in the same battle, on 13 October. The companies reported the loss of one officer (suffering from gas) and 37 other ranks (3 killed, 18 wounded, 16 suffering from gas).

Corporal Louis Ackroyd is buried in Plot/Grave 67 with another 120 or so casualties in Mazingarbe Communal Cemetery (between Lens and Bethune), Pas-de-Calais. Memorial ID No. 56187542. The cemetery was used by units and field ambulances from June 1915 to February 1916. It contains 108 Commonwealth burials of the First World War and 24 French war graves.

Louis was posthumously awarded the 1914-15 star campaign medal of the British Empire for his service in World War One, together with the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.



Mazingarbe Communal Cemetery.

An obituary noted that Louis:

“concealed his considerable abilities under an unusually modest demeanor, and from the beginning of his career he exhibited that profound sense of duty which has now called him to give his best abilities and finally his life in defense of our liberties”. Finer words were never said. Corporal Ackroyd was clearly a fine upstanding young man, scholar and sportsman and very well thought of by all who knew him. Tributes to Corporal Ackroyd were also made by the Heckmondwike and Rastrick schools, Leeds and Manchester Universities and the local churches in Heckmondwike.

A special memorial service for Corporal Ackroyd was held at St. Georges Congregational Church in Heckmondwike on the following Sunday after the confirmation of his death. This was conducted by Reverend A. Graham Elderidge, The subject of Reverend Elderidge’s service was *“Immortality: The Natural Sequence of Mortality”*. His words included the following:


“The world is full of imperfections and the most imperfect thing is man. Nature is much more perfect. Indeed, in her adaptation she reaches perfection. But man’s mental and moral capabilities are never realized. The short span of life will not allow of development of reason, will, conscience, love. Most of man’s best qualities are reached when he nears the end this life. Such qualities demand a sequence for their perfection and fruition. Life must be completed, not left undone. The mystery of death therefor is not to be dreaded. There is a common fear of death and that may

be caused through it's being an unknown experience in mortality. But this fear of death is our great minister. Yet the most unnatural thing would be for us to go on living past our time. The whole system of life is founded on the process of death. We could serve no purpose in this life past the allotted span of our years. Man was made perishable from the first. Scripture, conscience and common sense declare that sin is not the cause of death. Death preceded moral transgression; for witness death was a natural process in the world before man was. Death is therefore perfectly natural."

Tributes were also paid to Corporal Louis in the local newspapers. See the following examples:

HECKMONDWIKE'S ROLL OF HONOUR.
MORE DISTRESSING CASUALTIES.

Official news has now been received at Heckmondwike of the death of Corporal Louis Ackroyd, of the Royal Engineers, to which we alluded last week upon unofficial information. Corporal Ackroyd (who had had a successful career at the local secondary school) enlisted on August Bank Holiday, and was in France within a week. He had come unharm- ed out of the heavy fighting at the end of last month, and was sitting in what was thought to be a place of safety on Sunday, October 3rd, when a splinter from a shell inflicted a wound in the neck which proved fatal the same day.



Deceased, who was only twenty-four years of age, was the son of Mrs. D. Ackroyd; of Rydal-terrace, Jeremy-lane, Heckmond- wike, and prior to joining the Army held the position of assistant headmaster at the Rastrick Grammar School. Mrs. Ackroyd and family have received a large number of letters of sympathy, amongst those who have written being Mr. Langham, head- master at the Rastrick Grammar School, deceased's college friends at Leeds and Manchester, the teachers at the Heckmond- wike School, and the Heckmondwike Women's Patriotic Guild. A memorial ser- vice is to be held at the George-street Con- gregational Chapel on Sunday morning, at which the Pastor (the Rev. A. Graham Eld- ridge) will preach on the subject of "Im- mortality: the Natural Outcome of Mor- tality."

Corporal Ackroyd is remembered by the Spen Valley Historical Society which has recorded and researched 157 local Spen Valley men who lost their lives in the First World War and

created an impressive obituary for each soldier, including their picture where one is available for display. The Society's email address is *spenvalleyhistoricalsociety@gmail.com*. Therefore, there is an account of Louis's life and his military record on their website. I have written to the Society sending them a better picture of Louis and providing them with additional information about Louis's life and I have received a positive response from them.

Corporal Ackroyd's name and a brief summary of his life and sacrifice is also included on the Role of Honour which has been compiled by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. This is a very important electronic record and can be easily searched to locate any individual soldier. The Role of War Dead covers all of the armed forces personnel who died in both World Wars. Corporal Louis is also remembered on numerous web-sites including the British Legion and The Great War Forum. It is very gratifying to see that his sacrifice is so widely acknowledged and documented and above all remembered and valued.

More recently Louis Ackroyd's nephew, the late Dr Louis Ackroyd (my uncle, who was made after Corporal Louis Ackroyd), published "Heckmondwike at War, 1914-1918" in 2000 in which he paid tribute to the men of Heckmondwike, including Louis, who lost their lives serving their country.

Corporal Ackroyd's parents (Dan and Mary Jane) would have received a Death Plaque after the War to commemorate his death. The Plaque was a 12 centimetre diameter disk cast in bronze gunmetal, which included an image of Britannia and a lion, and also two dolphins that represented Great Britain's sea power and the emblem of Imperial Germany's eagle being torn to pieces by another lion. Britannia is holding an oak spray with leaves and acorns. Beneath this was a rectangular tablet where the deceased name was cast into the plaque. No rank was given as it was intended to show equality in their sacrifice. On the outer edge of the disk it bears the inscription, *'He died for freedom and honour'*.

The Death Plaque was posted to the next of kin protected by a firm cardboard purpose made folder, which was then placed in a white HMSO envelope. Production of the plaques and scrolls, which was supposed to have been financed by German reparation money, began in 1919 with approximately 1,150,000 issued. They commemorated those who fell between 4th August, 1914 and 10th January, 1920 for home, Western Europe and the Dominions, whilst the final date for the other theatres of war or for those died of attributable causes was 30th April 1920.

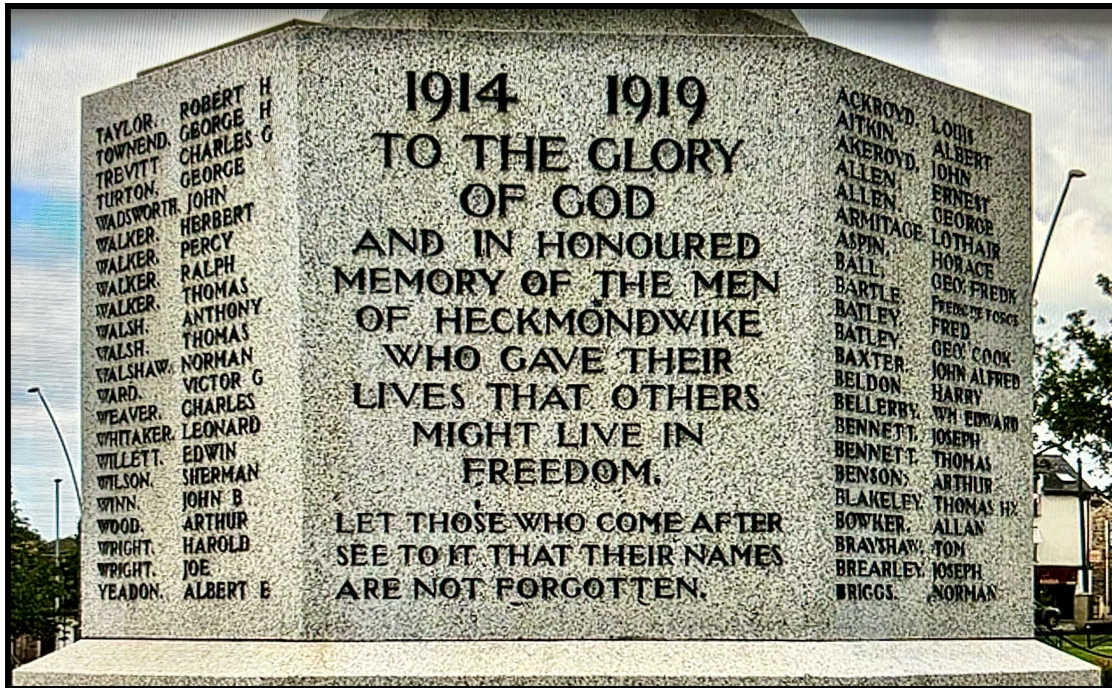
Corporal Ackroyd was also awarded the 1914/15 Star, the British War Medal WW1 and the Victory Medal for his active service in the 1st World War between 5th August 1914 and 11th November 1918.

Corporal Ackroyd's name is recorded on the War Memorials at the University of Manchester, Leeds University, Rastrick Grammar School, Brighouse West Yorkshire and on the George St Chapel Tablet (WMR 22057) in Huddersfield. As Louis attended both Universities and represented them in sport, these are very important and fitting acknowledgements.

Corporal Louis Ackroyd's sacrifice is also recorded very splendidly on the Heckmondwike War Memorial, which is inscribed as follows:

"To the Glory of God and In Honoured Memory of the Men of Heckmondwike Who Gave Their Lives That others Might Live in Freedom. Let Those Who Come After See To It That Their Names Are Not Forgotten".

"When you go home tell them of us and say, for your tomorrow we gave up our today".



Above is the hexagonal granite base of the World War One War Memorial in Heckmondwike. Louis Ackroyd's name is in the right-hand face of the Memorial at the top left.