

Lance Corporal William Thomas Bestford®

Regimental number: 1242

1st/2nd (Northumbrian) Field Company, Royal Engineers

born: 8 January 1893–died: 21 July 1916

Lance Corporal William Thomas Bestford was one of 704,803 soldiers from the British Isles who died in or because of the First World War.¹



William Thomas Bestford

Source: Courtesy of Joanne Clark

William came from a mining family. His father and both his grandfathers worked in the coal mines.² He was born on 8 January 1893 in Bedlington, Northumberland, England,³ the third child of Thomas Bestford (1861–1947)⁴ and Elizabeth Ann (née Reed) (1861–1943).⁵

Both his parents were born in small Northumberland coal-mining villages about 2 km apart. Thomas, the son of Robert and Dorothy Bestford, was born in Bebside; Elizabeth Ann, the daughter of Luke and Mary Reed, in Cowpen.

In 1881, Thomas was working as a coal miner and living with his parents in Bedlington;⁶ Elizabeth Ann was a servant at Benridge Hall, Kirkley, Northumberland.⁷ Thomas and Elizabeth Ann married in the second quarter of 1889 in the district of Newcastle upon Tyne, Northumberland.⁸

The couple had six children. Robert (1889–1917)⁹ was the eldest, followed by Luke Reed (1891–1976),¹⁰ William Thomas, Adam (1894–1961),¹¹ George (1897–?),¹² and finally Thomas (1899–1978).¹³

In early April 1891, Thomas, Elizabeth and son Robert were living in a three-room dwelling at Furnace and Bank Top, Bedlington. Thomas was working as a coal miner.¹⁴

The family was still at that address three years later when William was born; however, Thomas was now working as a candle manufacturer.¹⁵ He was still in that trade in March 1901. The family, which had grown with the birth of three more sons, was residing in a three-room dwelling at Ironworks, Bedlington. Robert, Luke, William and Adam most likely attended school, while George and Thomas remained at home.¹⁶

During the next decade, William's father returned to working in the coal mines. In April 1911, 18-year-old William was working as a cartwright and living with his parents and four siblings in a six-room house at 36 St. Cuthbert's Road, Gateshead, Durham. Luke was employed by the North Eastern Railway, Adam worked at a bakery, and George and Thomas attended school.¹⁷ Robert, who was living at the Royal Hotel, Low Walker, was working as a barman.¹⁸



Bestford Sons (L to R) Robert, Thomas, (standing), George (sitting in front), and Adam Bestford

Source: Courtesy of Joanne Clark

50th (Northumbrian) Division in May 1915).

When war was declared on 4 August 1914, William was 21 years old; like many others at the time, he and his brothers were caught up in the patriotic fervour that swept the country.

During the course of the war, all the brothers except Luke served in the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). George enlisted in the Northumberland Fusiliers in 1914. Robert, who was then employed by the North Eastern Railway and exempt from military service, enlisted in the Durham Light Infantry on 11 December 1915.

Thomas enlisted in the Royal Engineers and was at the Front by February 1917. William and Adam enlisted in the 1st/2nd (Northumbrian) Field Coy [Coy=Company], Royal Engineers (RE), Territorial Force (TF), at its headquarters at Barras Bridge, Newcastle upon Tyne, about 6 km from Gateshead, in September or October 1914.¹⁹

The 1st/2nd (Northumbrian) Field Company was a unit of the Northumbrian Divisional Engineers that provided engineering and technical support to the Northumbrian Division (renumbered the

On 4 August 1914, the Northumbrian Divisional Engineers comprised three units: the 1st (The Newcastle) Northumbrian Field Company, the 2nd (The Newcastle) Northumbrian Field Company, and the Northumbrian (The Newcastle) Divisional Telegraph Company.

On 31 August 1914, the Territorial Force was authorized to raise "2nd Line" units. As a result, the 2nd (The Newcastle) Northumbrian Field Company expanded into two companies. The 1st/2nd (Northumbrian) Field Company, RE, TF (later renumbered the 447th Field Company, Royal Engineers), served on the Western Front with the 50th (Northumbrian) Division. The 2nd/2nd (Northumbrian) Field Company, RE, TF (later renumbered the 450th Field Company, Royal Engineers), served initially with the 63rd Division and from 16 September 1916 to March 1919 with the 15th (Indian) Division.²⁰

With the onset of the war, all units of the Northumbrian Division were mobilized and assigned to the Tyne defences. The war came to northeastern England on 16 December 1914, when the German Navy shelled Scarborough, Whitby and Hartlepool, causing 592 civilian casualties.²¹ In early April 1915, the Northumbrian Division received orders to proceed to the Front.

On 16 April 1915, the 1st/2nd (Northumbrian) Field Company, RE, TF, travelled by train from Newcastle upon Tyne to Southampton, arriving at 3 a.m. on 17 April. The drivers and horses sailed

on the SS *African Princess*; the officers and other ranks (ORs), including two sappers, Adam²² and William Bestford,²³ on the SS *La Marguerite*, docking at Le Havre, France, at 3 a.m. on 18 April.

The usual procedure for a division after it arrived in France or Flanders was to camp in a selected area for additional training before moving to the battlefield.²⁴ The Northumbrian Division did not have this introductory period.

The division's infantry battalions, based in the vicinity of Steenvoorde, France, were ordered into action at the Second Battle of Ypres, 22 April–25 May 1915, which was a series of four separate battles: the Battle of Gravenstafel Ridge, the Battle of St. Julien, the Battle of Frezenberg, and the Battle of Bellewaarde. It was at the Battle of St. Julien that the enemy first used poison gas.²⁵

The 1st/2nd (Northumbrian) Field Company was camped at Brandhoek, near Poperinge, Belgium. By 26 April, William and the others were working at night under constant shellfire to construct a new switch line passing through Hooze to join up with frontline trenches near Hill 60. In order to pass Ypres under the cover of darkness, the men left the camp at 7 p.m., walked the 9 km to the new defence line, and worked until 2 a.m. before returning.²⁶

During May and June, the field company was stationed near Steenvoorde helping to design and build the new frontline fortification around Ypres. There were casualties in the field company, mainly from shell and sniper fire, but some from poison gas. The losses in the infantry brigades were much higher. By 25 May, the 149th Brigade, 50th (Northumbrian) Division, for example, had lost 42 officers and 1,912 ORs, over two-thirds of its strength.²⁷

The field company remained in the Ypres Salient area until mid-July 1915. On 17 July at Dranouter, Belgium, the men had their first baths and change of clothing since arriving at the Front. The next day, the field company moved to Armentières, France, where it remained until 11 December 1915.

On 26 August at Armentières, Sapper William Thomas Bestford was promoted to lance corporal.²⁸ His duties would have included such projects as constructing a barrel bridge to cross the River Lys, installing concrete machine gun emplacements, and building or fortifying trenches. On 5 December 1915, he and Adam were granted leave.²⁹ Most likely they visited their family in Gateshead. Luke and his wife Margaret were expecting their first child, John Gilroy Bestford.³⁰

By the time William and Adam returned to the Front in mid-December, the 1st/2nd Field Company was once more stationed at Ypres, Belgium. It would remain in the Ypres Salient area until the end of July 1916. In April, it was located at Kemmel, in May, at La Clytte (a.k.a. De Klijte), in June, at Kemmel and in July, at Vierstraat.

With the assistance of work parties of infantry troops, the 1st/2nd Field Company designed and fortified existing trenches, built new ones, repaired roads, and constructed a trench tramway and an observation park near Vierstraat for the Royal Field Artillery. It also found and piped potable water to the trenches near Mount Kemmel. This work was accomplished mainly at night under constant danger from shell and sniper fire.

On 17 April, the men enjoyed a concert in a barn near Kemmel to celebrate the anniversary of the division's arrival in France. On 19 May, at La Clytte, a football competition was organized by the Division Command. The field company then held its own sports day, with the men competing in racing events.

On 26 June, some of the men took part in an unsuccessful raid on the enemy's trenches that was led by the 4th East Yorkshire Battalion. The sappers' role was to blow up the enemy's machine gun emplacements. In mid-July, the field company was stationed near Vierstraat, constructing a new communication trench, observation posts and concrete trench mortar emplacements.

On 19 July 1916, William was critically injured, although where and how was not recorded.³¹ William was taken to No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station (CCS) at Bailleul, France, about 13 km from Vierstraat.

A casualty clearing station was a medical unit behind the frontlines, usually located near transportation. Casualties who could not be adequately treated were stabilized before being transported to a field or military hospital.³²

William was either one of 355 injured men admitted on 19 July, or one of 446 from 20 July.³³ He was one of nine patients to die there on Friday, 21 July. His death was recorded by the No. 1 CCCS chaplain. His mother informed the community of William's death in the *Newcastle Journal* on 28 July 1916.³⁴

Earlier that month, she had reported that her son, Sergeant George Bestford, had been wounded.³⁵ George did recover and returned to the Front.

Lance Corporal William Thomas Bestford was buried at Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, Nord (Grave/Memorial Reference II. F. 47)³⁶ on 22 July.³⁷ Bailleul is in France, close to the Belgian border. It was occupied on 14 October 1914 and became an important railhead, air depot and hospital centre. Several casualty clearing stations, including No. 1 CCCS, were quartered there.

The earliest Commonwealth burials at Bailleul were made in April 1915. An extension was built and burials continued until April 1918; they occurred again in September and after the Armistice, when soldiers' remains were brought in from the neighbouring battlefields.

William's parents received his effects; included was the ring that William was wearing in his photograph. It was later given to his brother Thomas.



William Bestford's ring

Source: Courtesy of Joanne Clark

William was posthumously awarded the 1914–15 Star (for serving in a theatre of war between 5 August 1914 and 31 December 1915), the Victory Medal (for service in an operational theatre), and the British War Medal (for service overseas between 1914 and 1918).³⁸ As next of kin, his father also received a memorial plaque and a parchment scroll.

In 1917, four of William's brothers were still serving in the BEF, which would have been a terrible worry for his parents. His older brother, Corporal Robert Bestford, was killed on 1 December 1917. His body was never identified. His name was later inscribed on Panel 10 of the Cambrai Memorial, Louverval, France.³⁹

Thomas and Elizabeth Ann must have celebrated the war's end on 11 November 1918 and eagerly awaited the safe return of their surviving sons. Adam, discharged from the 447 Field Company, RE, was home by late 1918. He married Lizzie J. Elliott in the 4th quarter of 1918.⁴⁰ Thomas, a 2nd Lieutenant in the 448 Field Company, RE (India Division), and George, a Lieutenant in 1st/4th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, were home most likely by late 1920 or 1921.⁴¹

They returned to a Britain that had lost its competitive advantage in basic industries such as textiles, coal, iron, steel and shipbuilding. There was mass unemployment, particularly in south Wales; in Northumberland, Durham, and west Cumberland, England; and in Clydeside, Scotland.⁴²

On 13 May 1921, George emigrated to South Africa, where he joined the South African police.⁴³ Thomas followed his brother on 21 July 1922, sailing on the HMS *Kinfauns Castle* to Durban, South Africa.⁴⁴ George remained in Africa, returning home for two months in 1929 to visit his parents.⁴⁵ In 1933, he married Doris Constance Smith in Umtata, Cape Province.⁴⁶ Thomas returned to England in 1932;⁴⁷ he married Greta E. Mallam there in 1935.⁴⁸

On the eve of another war in 1939, William's parents were living at 38 St. Cuthbert's Road, Gateshead. His father was a retired flour mill worker.⁴⁹ Luke, who was still working for North Eastern Railway, was also living with his family in Gateshead.⁵⁰ Adam and his family were living in Tynemouth, about 12 km from Gateshead, where Adam was bakery manager at the North Tyneside Cooperative Society.⁵¹

In 1945, George saw his family one more time. During the Second World War, he served with the 6th South African Brigade and was captured at Tobruk. After spending three years and four months as a prisoner of war, he was released from the prison camp at Lollar, Hesse, Germany, on 6 April 1945. Before his return to South Africa, he stayed with Adam and his family. Major George Bestford was awarded a DSO (Distinguished Service Order), which was presented to him by HRH King George VI in Pretoria during the Royal Tour of 1947.⁵²

Lance Corporal William Thomas Bestford's sacrifice was not forgotten. On 31 March 1926, his and Robert's names were listed in the *Roll of Gateshead Men who Fell in the Great War, Honour Book*, (now located in the Gateshead Central Library).⁵³ Perhaps because Robert had no known grave, his parents had his name inscribed on William's gravestone at Bailleul.⁵⁴

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