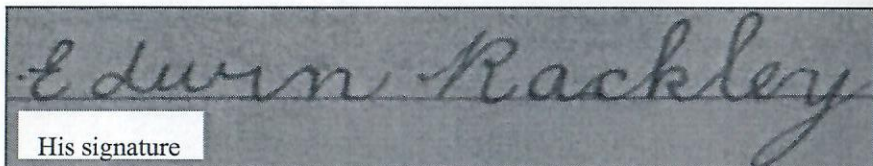


## “Men live and die like heroes”

1 July 1916 is a date seared into our collective consciousness. It marks the opening day of the Battle of the Somme, a day on which 19,240 British soldiers were killed in a single action. It is unsurprising therefore that such a catastrophic moment in our national history should have also directly impacted our own community. As the centenary of this moment approaches, an opportunity is presented to explore the life of a former resident of Sarratt, who was a casualty of that fateful morning.

Edwin Rackley was born on 5 December 1887 to William and Sarah of Dawes Lane. The third of eventually nine surviving children, he was baptised the following January by Rector Edward Ryley in our parish church; and in spite of the recent establishment of the Providence Mission Hall on his doorstep, he remained a member of the Church of England throughout his life.

By the age of 13, Edwin had completed his five years of mandatory education at Sarratt school and joined his father to work as a ‘cowman’ at Newhall Farm. Soon after this, and following a family relocation to Myrtle Cottages, Edwin was motivated to attempt a very different career. Within weeks of his seventeenth birthday, he had enlisted into the Bedfordshire Regiment, before later transferring to 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Middlesex Regiment in August 1905. His military attestation details that he was 5ft 3inches tall, weighed 8 stone, had grey eyes and brown hair.



His signature

Edwin was absent for the 1911 Census, possibly suggesting that he was still serving. In May 1913 however, he reappears as a porter, listed in the membership annals of National Union of Railwaymen.

Upon the outbreak of war, his battalion returned from Malta, before being sent to the Western Front in November 1914. Edwin would have returned to his regiment at this time, and possibly then taken part in their subsequent engagements at Neuve Chapelle, Aubers and Bois Grenier. On the eve of the Somme offensive his battalion was tasked with taking enemy positions located in the Mash Valley, near Ovillers. The topography of the landscape created a natural killing area in which 22 officers and 601 other ranks were killed, wounded or missing by first nightfall. Edwin, aged just 28, was among the dead, but his body was never identified. Today he is commemorated alongside the names of 72,000 other British and Commonwealth servicemen on the Thiepval Memorial to the missing.

Edwin’s death was, unfortunately, not the only family tragedy William and Sarah would face. Even after the Armistice, as Reverend Gilbert Ryley notes, ‘pitiable’ news broke of the death of another serving son George, aged 25, in

Palestine.

It is hoped that although a century has elapsed since his death, the example of men like Edwin Rackley has not lost its resonance with our village or this nation. At King and country’s call, he left Sarratt and all that was dear to him; he bore hardship, faced constant and mortal danger and ultimately lost his life through following the path of duty.

These words are dedicated to his memory and to all those like him who fell for the freedom of others. **Gregory Edmund, Sarratt Local History Society**



In Remembrance of  
Private Edwin Rackley (L/10576)  
2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion,  
(Duke of Cambridge’s Own) Middlesex Regiment  
5 December 1887 – 1 July 1916