

John Appleby Robson and the Battle of Arras

The Robson family arrived in Tansor around the year 1897. Originally from Northumberland, the family lived briefly in Upton (Huntingdonshire), before arriving at Tansor Wold Farm, where the head of the household, William Robson, farmed. Two of the Robson children – William Cecil and John Appleby - went to war. Both boys initially attended school in the village, before finishing their education at Laxton Grammar School in Oundle. In 1876, the then headmaster decided to split the school into two: Laxton Grammar School was for local day boys, whilst Oundle School provided a classical education for boarding pupils.

Number since Commencement of separate	Book	School	Name	Boards	Age	Initial	Home Address	Place of Birth	Date of Birth	Date of Entrance	Date of Leaving
572	711	Wootton Bassett	Walter Harold	Day-boy	only	W. R.	North St. Oundle	Northampton	21.11.05	Sep. 12	July 16
573	712	Taylor	John Lampray	-	-	E. B.	Ashton Wold, Oundle	Leamington	12.11.98	-	12 Dec. 1913
574	713	Parsons	Frederick Walter	-	-	R.	Vinco Terrace, Elton	Waddington	18.11.98	-	12 July 1913
575	714	Robson	John Appleby	-	second	W.	Tansor Wold, Oundle	Tansor Wold	24.11.98	-	April 1914
576	715	Holdsworth	Walter	Boarder	eldest	W. W. Tomlin	Corshamton R ³ Sutton, Surrey	Reynolds	9.1.98	Jan 12	Dec 1914
577	716	Bullimore	Reverend William	Boarder	eldest	W. K.	Southgate, Stamford	Deeping, Stamford	28.11.97	May 12	July 14
578	717	Bullimore	Arthur Leslie	-	second	-	-	-	24.11.99	-	-
579	718	Jackson	Henry	-	only	J.	Orange Farm, Lutborough	Lombard	8.11.01	-	April 16
580	719	Meyson	Jacques	-	second	L.	8 Rue Lycaeus, Orleans	Leroune	3.11.98	-	July 1913
581	720	Phillippo	Cecil Mursell	-	only	R. C.	2100 Orpington, S.E.C.	Slough	27.11.02	-	Dec 1913
582	721	Raby	George William	Day-boy	eldest	W. W.	St. Andrew's, Peterborough	St. Andrew's	4.11.00	-	Dec 1914
583	722	Vanslow	Sarah Courtney	-	second	R. S. Gifford	Rode Farm, Warrington	St. Andrew's	6.11.01	-	April 1914
584	723	Blower	Henry Frank	Boarder	only	A. H.	Crown Prince Palace, Athens	Erith	12.11.1902	Sep. 12	Dec 13
585	724	Lescoe	Frank	Day-boy	only	W. E.	Carlton R ³ Ringwood, Hampshire	St. Andrew's	7.11.1900	-	July 15
586	725	Varak	Arthur	Boarder	eldest	H.	Shrapstone	Asby, Bancombe	20.1.1901	-	Dec. 15

Laxton Grammar School Register, 1912, featuring John Appleby Robson

John Robson left Laxton Grammar School in 1914, at the age of fifteen. The brothers joined the Northants Yeomanry, a cavalry division, and the mounted element of the Territorial Force. William enlisted at Towcester, and John at Peterborough. Little is known about William's service, other than that he was transferred to the Royal Scots Fusiliers during the war, and gained promotion to the rank of Second Lieutenant. He was wounded in 1918. After the war, William returned to Tansor Wold Farm, where he lived until at least 1929.

John remained with the cavalry, and was transferred to the Northamptonshire Regiment 1/1 Battalion. The war diaries for the regiment show that he was stationed in France for several months from June 1916 at Habarcq, east of Arras. During this period, it seems as though the unit saw little front line action, and spent much of the time in training exercises and on escort duty, transferring groups of prisoners of war.

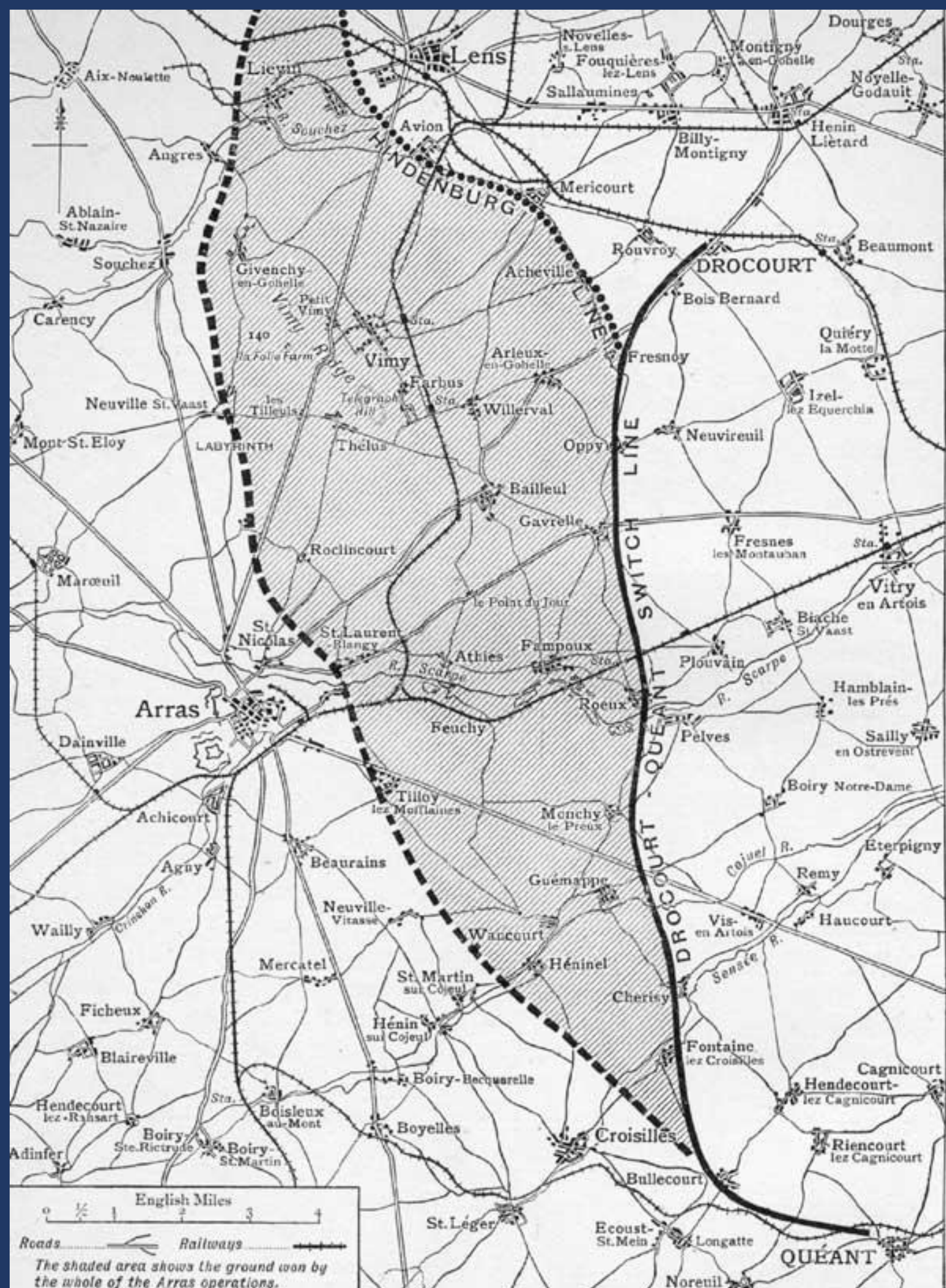
Nevertheless, the battalion was in the right area to take part in the major offensive that became known as the Battle of Arras. Following heavy fighting on the Somme, the Germans had taken the decision to shorten their lines, and spent nine months constructing a new

9.4.17
"...the regiment proceeded east along the south bank of the Scarpe. Progress was slow, as [they] had to cross the trench line system which was a mass of shell holes."

defensive position that the British called 'the Hindenburg Line'. By March 1917, German troops had retreated behind this strong defence. The British planned to attack in concert with French troops, and the French were convinced that this operation would result in the end of the war, which was of course not the case. Monchy-le Preux was an important part of the northern end of the Hindenburg Line, known as the Drocourt-Quéant Line.¹ The war diary for April 1917 records that 1/1 Battalion joined with the 6th Cyclist Battalion to form the 6th Corps Mounted Troops. They moved into position two miles west of Arras on 9th April. Their orders were to capture the first three lines of enemy trenches, with a final objective to seize and hold a line between Guemappe and Monchy, and to follow this up by taking and holding the crossings of the



British cavalry advancing near Monchy-le-Preux at the Battle of Arras, April 1917



Ground won by allied troops during the Arras offensive, April 1917

River Scarpe. At Fampoux, they met with opposition, being fired at by German snipers using local houses as cover. The snipers were driven back, and enemy weapons were captured. That night, the regiment bivouacked in the marshes east of Feuchy, although the horses remained saddled up in readiness for action. All of the next day, the Germans continued to shell the river valley and several casualties were reported. On April 11th, orders were received to proceed to Orange Hill. The personal diary of Robert Mackay – who fought with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders – records that 'there wasn't a damned bit of cover, except a row of broken telegraph poles'. Early that morning, Monchy was taken by Allied forces, and the regiment proceeded under heavy artillery fire. It is clear from the diary that the 1/1 Battalion were in the thick of the

11.4.17
"...[Monchy] was under very heavy shell fire, B & C Squadrons were given orders to retire, which they did to Orange Hill..."

fighting at the front line, and that the German opposition was extremely strong. Private John Robson was reported in the regimental diary as wounded. He died two days later and was buried in the British Cemetery at Duisans. He was eighteen. His death was reported in the Laxton School magazine in July 1917.

1. <http://www.1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/battle-of-arras/>