

Voices of War

Harold Ackroyd VC, MC
1877 - 1917





Harold Ackroyd in uniform



Gravestone



Medals

Name: Harold Ackroyd VC, MC

Other names: n/a

Date of Birth: 18.07.1877

Place of birth: Southport, Lancashire, UK

Nationality: British

Date of Death: 11.08.1917

Place of death: Jargon Trench, Ypres, Belgium

Service No:

Unit(s): Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC), Attached to 6th Battalion, Berkshire Regiment

Rank: Captain

Medals and Awards: 1914 (Mons) Star, British War and Victory Medals
Victoria Cross, Military Cross

Education: Mintholme College, Southport, and Shrewsbury School.

University: Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge

Clubs and Affiliations: Guys Hospital, London, Queen's Hospital, Birmingham, David Lewis Northern Hospital, Liverpool, British Medical Association (BMA).



Life Story

Harold Ackroyd was born on 18 July 1877 in Roe Lane, Southport, Lancashire to Ellen and Edward Ackroyd. His father was chairman of the [Cheshire Lines & Southport Extension Railway Company](#). He was educated locally at Mintholme College, Southport, and Shrewsbury School. Following his elder brother Edward, who had matriculated in 1893 he then entered Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge in October 1896. He completed his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1899, before travelling. When he returned he spent one year in the research group of Gowland Hopkins before continuing his medical studies at Guy's Hospital, London. He gained his BC in 1903, MB (Bachelor of Medicine) in 1904 and his MD (Doctor of Medicine) in 1910.

Family Life: Harold met Mabel Robina Smythe (1877–1947) matron of Strangeways Hospital, Cambridge while he was working at Guy's Hospital. They were married on 1 August 1908 and lived in Great Shelford, Cambridgeshire where their children Ursula (1909–1993) and Stephen (1912–1963) were born. They then moved to Brooklands, 46 Kneesworth Street, Royston, Hertfordshire, where his son Anthony (1914–1988) was born.

Medical career: Harold worked at Guy's Hospital in during the years 1904-05, London before serving as the House Surgeon at Queen's Hospital in Birmingham. He was then employed at the David Lewis Northern Hospital, Liverpool 1905-06 before in 1908 securing an Ordinary Research Scholarship from the British Medical Association, which allowed him to



engage in research work at Cambridge, initially at the Strangeways Research Hospital. By the time he renewed his research scholarship in 1910 Ackroyd was working in the Pharmacological Laboratory with Walter E. Dixon. He then began research work in association with Frederick Gowland Hopkins, with the pair co-authoring a number of research papers.

Military service: At the outbreak of World War I, Harold was nearly 37 but, despite this he was keen to serve and he joined up on 15 February 1915, commissioning temporary lieutenant in the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC). In July 1915 he travelled to France attached as medical officer to the 6th Battalion of the [Royal Berkshire Regiment, \(Princess Charlotte of Wales's\)](#), part of the 53rd Brigade, 18th (Eastern) Division. After his promotion to temporary captain in 1916, he saw action at the [Battle of the Somme](#). On 19 July he worked trying to save those injured during the terrible fightign at Delville Wood which became the graveyard of the 53rd Brigade. This was three days of intense fighting following an assault on one of the enemy's strongest positions that resulted in some 700 men wounded in the *melée*. Working under heavy shelling and braving snipers, Ackroyd remained cool under the pressure, and saved many lives, despite being in immense danger him self - at one point he was blown into the air by an exploding shell. No less than 11 officers singled him out for praise in their written reports and he was recommended for the Victoria Cross. On 19 July 1916 he was awarded the Military Cross with the following citation:

“For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty during operations. He attended the wounded under heavy fire, and finally, when he had seen that all our wounded from behind the line had been got in, he went out beyond the front line and brought in both our own and enemy wounded, although



continually sniped at."

Ackroyd rescued many of the wounded from the 1st South African Infantry Brigade and there is a memorial to him in the room commemorating Delville Wood at Fort Beaufort Historical Museum, South Africa.. At the beginning of August, he was showing signs of severe nervous exhaustion he was reluctantly invalided home on 11 August 1916 for six weeks of leave. Of the opinion that he had recovered, by September Harold was pestering the Army Medical Board to allow him to return to his regiment in France, and they finally agreed, so he returned in December 1916.

Ypres: The 6th Battalion of the Royal Berkshire Regiment took part in the third battle of Ypres - better known as the [battle of Passchendaele](#). It was on the first day of the battle (31 July 1917), when the actions occurred which saw Harold receive 23 separate recommendations for the Victoria Cross. He was subsequently awarded this and his citation is as follows:

"For most conspicuous bravery. During recent operations Capt. Ackroyd displayed the greatest gallantry and devotion to duty. Utterly regardless of danger, he worked continuously for many hours up and down and in front of the line tending the wounded and saving the lives of officers and men. In so doing he had to move across the open under heavy machine-gun, rifle and shell fire. He carried a wounded officer to a place of safety under very heavy fire. On another occasion he went some way in front of our advanced line and brought in a wounded man under continuous sniping and machine-gun fire. His heroism was the means of saving many lives, and provided a magnificent example of courage, cheerfulness, and determination to the fighting men in whose midst he was carrying out his splendid work. This



gallant officer has since been killed in action.”

Having survived some of the fiercest fighting of the war, Harold finally lost his life on the 11 August 1917 due to a sniper while in a shell hole in the Jargon Trench area on the western edge of Glencorse Wood, Ypres. His second in command Private Albert Scriven wrote to Ackroyd's widow describing what happened:

“I was acting orderly corporal and on hearing the news I took a party of stretcher bearers but on arrival found he was dead. There were six other poor fellows in the same shell hole who met the same fate, it was a perfect death trap. He was visiting each company about 150 yds ahead of us to see if there were any wounded to attend to and was shot in the head by a sniper.”

Captain Ackroyd's posthumous VC was presented to his widow Mabel by George V at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on September 26, 1917.

There were numerous tributes to Captain Ackroyd's gallantry from comrades. Captain JN Richardson, one of his closest friends, wrote to his widow describing him as *“the biggest loss the battalion has ever suffered... In all fights he was worth a hundred men to us for morale's sake.”* To his commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel BE Clay, he was *“the most gallant man I have ever met”*. and the younger soldiers from his battalion were inspired by his feats of heroism as he repeatedly risked and eventually lost his life to save them. Harold's exact burial location is not known and





his headstone (above) in Birr Cross Roads Cemetery, Zillebeke reads
“believed to be buried in this cemetery”.





• CAPTAIN H. ACKROYD VC, MC •

Harold's medals were purchased from his family in 2003 by Lord Michael Ashcroft. The proceeds from the sale were used to endow an annual medical scholarship at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, Harold Ackroyd's alma mater. In addition, the college agreed to arrange an annual memorial lecture on a scientific subject connected with medicine. Ackroyd's medals were subsequently put on public display at the Imperial War Museum, London. Replicas of Ackroyd's Victoria Cross, his Military Cross and other war medals are on display at the RAMC HQ in Millbank, London along with a painting of him winning the Victoria Cross.





Above: The family home at Brooklands, 46 Kneesworth Street, Royston, Hertfordshire, where Harold's son Anthony (1914–1988) was born.



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In Memory Of

Captain

HAROLD ACKROYD

Service Cross, Military Cross

Royal Army Medical Corps who died on 11 August 1917 Age 40

Private Ernest Ackroyd, of Colchester is named at Medal H. Ackroyd, 201 and 1 Edge, United Kingdom

Remembered with Honour

BIBB CROSS ROADS CEMETERY

So Men T.



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COMMONWEALTH
WAR GRAVES
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WAR GRAVES COMMISSION



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