

# Two OE casualties of the Great War

by Michael Partridge

The College Archives were in 2014 privileged to receive from their families photographs and moving tributes to two young men, both educated at the College, who gave their lives in the Great War.

Both were not only respected but loved by their fellow soldiers of all ranks. Because this 100-year-old documentation is so rare and unusual, we have decided to publish portions of it as typifying and illustrating the sacrifice of the 174 Old Eastbournians who lost their lives in that conflict. An exhibition reflecting the short life of Alan Oxley was mounted by the College Archives team in Big School on Devonshire Day and on Speech Day.

## Arthur Passmore

Arthur Passmore was in Gonville from 1903 until 1906. He was a fine athlete, gaining his Stag as a forward in 1905 alongside Gordon Carey and Stephen Foot. He also won the seven mile steeplechase in March 1906, for which he was presented with a silver cup. Mr Arnold, who coached the first rugby team, said 'He is the best light forward in the team.



Arthur Passmore

His dash is splendid and, in the matter of tackling, if he once gets a claw on a runner, he seldom lets him go. He was a splendid boy'.

Gathorne Orr, his housemaster, wrote 'I have seldom ever met in my twenty years' experience as a house master a boy of such thoroughly reliable and conscientious character. He was always unselfish and anxious to do, not the easy thing, but the difficult. He was deservedly popular and we had, all of us, masters and boys, the greatest respect and affection for him. The country can ill afford to lose such a life'.

On leaving school Arthur joined the family firm of Alabaster, Passmore and Sons, printers, as Secretary and Director, where he was responsible for setting up an early employee pension scheme. He was a regular helper at the College Mission in Bethnal Green, a member of the Metropolitan Tabernacle Church and a Sunday School teacher.

He joined the Artists Rifles at the beginning of the war and was commissioned into the

9th Royal West Surrey Regiment in November 1914. After completing a machine gun course with distinction, he went to the front in October 1915 and was shortly after made his regiment's machine gun officer. His name was put forward for a mention in despatches for conspicuous gallantry in a night attack and, a few days later, on 5 April 1916 at Hulluch, he was killed while attempting to position his machine gun so as to enfilade the enemy. A bomb exploded beneath him and his body was not recovered. He is commemorated on the



The plaque in the Chapel commemorating Arthur Passmore's death

Loos Memorial near Lens (panels 13 to 15), alongside five other OEs.

Tributes by his fellow soldiers, from his commanding officer to one of his privates, make fascinating reading:

**His Colonel:** *He was one of the most promising subalterns I had. He took enormous interest in his work as a machine gun officer and was brave and fearless to a degree. He was most popular and is much missed by us all.*

**Major Rolls:** *He was a great favourite with all the officers and all his men were much attached to him. He handled his machine guns with great ability. A few days before he fell, his name was put down for promotion, and also for a mention in despatches for his 'conspicuous gallantry' in a night attack with machine guns. His Colonel was much attached to him and spoke in the highest terms of his work.*

**Captain Holland:** *I don't think I ever met a nicer fellow. He possessed every attribute necessary for an English gentleman. His character and splendid example will always remain fresh in my memory, and will be a great help to me for the remainder of my life.*

**Lieut Springfield:** *All the officers miss him greatly. He was a general favourite. He knew no fear and was always ready to do anything regardless of risk. His men worshipped him*

*as he was so kind and thoughtful. He was considered the cleverest machine gun officer in the regiment. He did brilliant work as machine gun officer, especially during the night attacks. On one occasion he saved a large number of my men.*

**Sergeant Reed:** *He was in C Crater at Hulluch about 10.30 or 11.00. We were holding one lip [of the crater] and the Germans the other. Lt Passmore went forward to fix a machine gun to enfilade the enemy, and was never seen afterwards. He was wounded before he went. He would never have been taken alive - he was not the man for that.*

**Corporal Rupert Shepherd:** *At midnight at Hulloch Mr Passmore went over the top with some bombers to take some craters; he was the first man over. A bomb exploded underneath him and he was seen to fall over. They went out several times afterwards to try to get him, but couldn't get anywhere near him. He was officer of the Lewis guns. He was liked by everybody. He had no fear whatever. If anything wanted doing he was always there.*

**Private Smith (one of his men):** *He was a real 'toff'. All his men loved him and would have done anything for him. He was so very kind and thoughtful for our comfort. He would never let us go short for anything.*

## Alan Hayes Oxley

Alan Hayes Oxley was a Home Boarder between 1911 and 1914. He was one of four brothers who lived with their parents in Grassington Road and attended the College as day boys. His sister Muriel married the then headmaster, the Revd Frederick Williams, and during the war played a distinguished part in helping to run a convalescent home in Blackwater Road for wounded soldiers.

Brother Walter (HB 1903-09) served with the Royal Engineers in the First World War and rose to the rank of Major General CB, CBE. Alan joined the Royal Garrison Artillery in January 1916 and, after training in Exeter, was commissioned and sent to the Somme in July, just after the beginning of the great offensive on that front. He served in B Battery, 149 Brigade RFA, and took part in most of the offensives on that front in 1916 and 1917.

Though continually in action, he seemed to bear a charmed life as he did not receive a scratch until he was killed on 10 December 1917, aged just 20, near Passchendaele while manning a forward observation post which was struck by a high explosive shell. His body was recovered, virtually unmarked, and was buried in The Huts Cemetery near Ypres (Grave XV.A7).

Bill Bowden has produced the family tree (illustrated on page 26) which depicts in red those members of the Oxley (and later O'Conor) families with connections to the College. Alan Oxley's great nephew is Piers O'Conor, who attended the College 2009 to 2014.

Alan's mother received a remarkable number of letters of condolence from his

fellow soldiers of all ranks and these have been preserved. We record below extracts from some of the most moving of these messages.

**His Servant/Batman, Gunner Barnshaw:** *It is with profound regret and deepest sorrow that I take this liberty to write to you. I have been your dear son's servant for the past fourteen months, and I feel as though I ought to try and offer you some little consolation in your tragic and terrible bereavement.*

*His death came as a very big shock to me. I was very much attached to him, and shall never forget him. He was always very considerate and thoughtful and a thorough gentleman in every respect. In the tightest corners he was always to be depended upon. Fearless, cool and courageous and gave everyone with him a good heart to carry on with their duties. A braver soldier never lived than he was. He was beloved by all who knew him and everyone held for him the highest esteem and respect. The whole battery mourns his loss. He was undoubtedly the most popular officer we have ever had.*

**Captain John Madden-Gaskell:** *Beyond saying what you already know - how much we all admired and loved your son - I will not help to recall more than necessary the great sorrow you have had. Perhaps it would interest you to know that I was able to bring his body in, with the help of some men the following morning.*

**His Commanding Officer, Lt Col Godfrey Masters:** *I am very sorry to have to tell you that your son was killed yesterday. A large shell hit the front of his OP and killed him instantaneously. Your son was a very gallant and capable officer always ready and willing to do any duty. He set a very high standard by his cheerfulness and devotion. He was very popular with all ranks in the Brigade.*

**The Headmaster The Revd F S Williams:** *I must write a line to give you all good wishes for Christmas - it would seem almost a mockery to wish you a happy Christmas, when I fear it must be one of the saddest you have spent, and yet I feel sure that it is sadder for you than poor Alan. Though his life was not long, he made good in it and gave all he had, not for himself, which is really the very essence of Christianity.*

**Captain Harry Imbert Terry:** *I have only just heard from my old Battery about your son, and I feel that I must write and tell you how dreadfully sorry I am. I was his battery commander for a long time in France. He was one of the best subalterns I had, always cheery and full of life, and only too ready to do any job that came along. He was an officer that the Regiment can ill spare and he will be sadly missed by all his brother officers to who he had greatly endeared himself.*

**Lt John D Bell:** *I expect you have already received official intimation of poor old Alan's death in action. I am just writing to let you know how badly we all miss him and how very very sorry we are. Alan and I have been in the same battery since September or October of last year and he was my best friend. He was a very fine officer and very*

*brave. Everyone in the battery admired him. Alan was forward observing when a large shell struck the observation post killing him instantaneously. We buried him in a cemetery well behind the line where his grave will be properly cared for and where it can be easily identified.*

**Captain Alister Campbell, 11th Bn Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders:** *I am distressed to read in The Times Announcements of poor dear old "Al Lee's" death in action. I can hardly believe it. It only seems like yesterday we saw his dear cheery face at Eastbourne. The appalling tragedy of this terrible war is too awful - I hasten to offer you and the whole family my deepest sympathy in the great loss you have sustained.*



**Alan Hayes Oxley**

*What a fine and manly officer this dear laddie made. I am sure you must be proud of him when you receive letters of condolence from his brother officers and his commanding officer. Only the kindly hand of Time can heal the wound which many thousands of mothers are experiencing daily. When the dark days are over it will be, perhaps, some comfort and solace to reflect that your very own has paid the great sacrifice.*

**Major Noel McFarlane:** *It is one of the saddest and most difficult things I have ever had to do to write and tell you your boy was killed the day before yesterday. He had left the battery at dawn to spend his day as FOO in one OP - an old German concrete pillbox. About midday a heavy shell hit the corner of it and blew it in killing your boy and another subaltern from another Battery instantaneously. I was told of it by the infantry on the telephone and went up at once. He had been killed absolutely instantaneously by the concussion and could have known and felt nothing. His head was quite untouched and his face was quite peaceful. We laid him to rest yesterday morning in the British Cemetery near Dickebusch. Nearly all the Battery who were not up at the guns were there and the men sent a beautiful wreath with 'very deep sympathy'. Oxley as we always called him was quite one of the best subalterns I have ever met. Everyone loved him. He was the most gallant and popular*

*officer in the Battery and his loss to us is literally irreparable.*

*As you may know I only took over the Battery in March but I had long ago grown most awfully fond of your boy and besides losing in him my best officer I have also lost a very great friend. I should be proud to feel I was a great a friend of his as he was of mine. He was always so unfailingly cheerful and plucky and we are all simply stunned by his death. I have never met one of his age with such wonderful character.*

*I was censoring the Battery's letters last night and found one from one of the men in which he was writing to his home of our great loss. He said he had lost 'a true gentleman and a man'. No man could wish for a finer tribute from one of his men.*

*All your boy's kit is being forwarded to you through this base. It consists of a valise and a kit bag. All the smaller personal things I am keeping in his suitcase which will be taken home by the next officer going on leave. This will be much quicker and safer than the other way.*

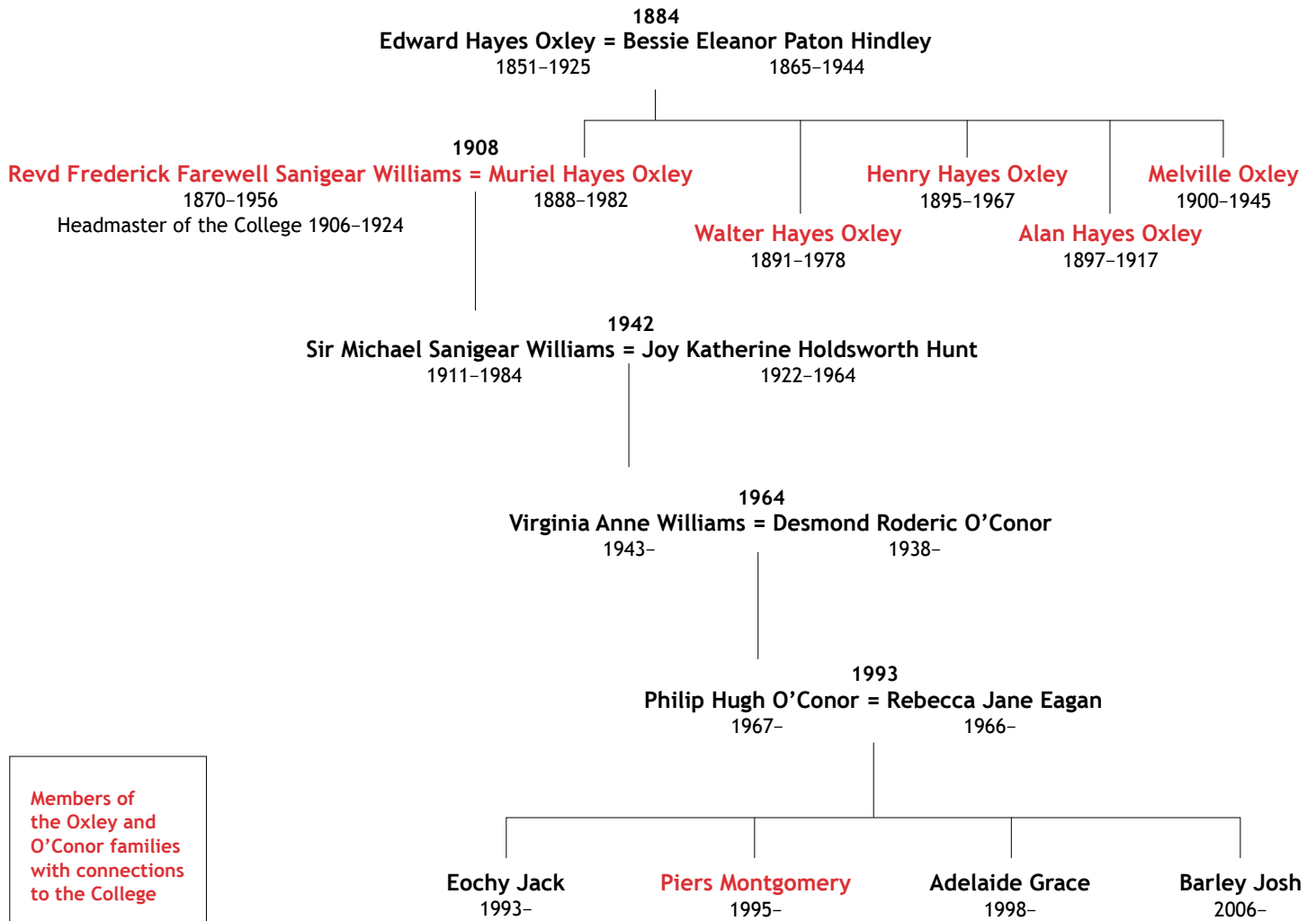
**QMS Fred Smith:** *'I thank you very much for the promise of a photograph of your son. I assure you it will be very highly treasured by me, although he was an officer and my superior, we were very best of friends. The photograph will always bring back to me our happy times together and there were many.*

*The boys who were in the Battery at the same time as Mr Oxley always recount their dealings with him because he was their champion. His droll remarks and pranks are very much missed by all.*

**Lt R Flenley:** *You will by this time have heard of the death of your son. I don't like to intrude on your grief but I knew him well and I feel I must first let you know how we shall miss him here. Major McFarlane, will, I know, be telling you how he was killed. We buried him today in a military cemetery just north west of Dickebusch. His grave was marked today with a cross. He joined my battery in October of last year and we grew to like him more and more. You get to know a man pretty well when you share dugouts and duties with him and shall always think of the days when we were subalterns together in B/Neg Brigade as some of the happiest I have ever spent out here. He was one of the bravest and best subalterns in the Brigade. For he wasn't merely liked in the mess. His men, I knew, liked him enormously and I know they will miss him as we all shall. I am more sorry than I can say.*

**Lt Linton (Chaplain):** *Other letters will no doubt have informed you of the death of your son, 2 Lt A H Oxley of B 149 Brigade RFA, and will also have given you the details. I only write to express to you my deepest sympathy for your loss - I had the greatest respect for your son's character and am grateful to him for many little acts of kindness and help which he afforded me in my own special work. He will be greatly missed in his battery, where his cheerful, brave and philosophic spirit won him the affections of his men. I was speaking to some of them today, and one of his sergeants said he was*

# Oxley – Williams – O’Conor family tree



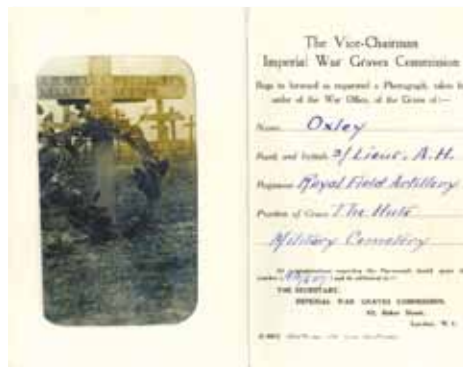
Members of the Oxley and O’Conor families with connections to the College

easily the most popular man in the battery and his death the greatest lost they could have had. The men have had a very trying time for some months now, and it is just the men like your son who have enabled them to carry on.

The funeral took place at about 10am this morning, and we laid him to rest in the new military cemetery north of Dickebusch, not far from Ypres.

Lt H Asquith 12th RFA: Your son was a brother subaltern of mine in B. Battery 149, and I hope you will excuse my writing to you in the circumstances to say how deeply I feel his loss. Major McFarlane has, I think, told you how it happened. Your son was on duty as forward observation officer, when it was reported from the infantry that two artillery officers had been killed at the observation post. The Major and I (who were with the guns) went forward immediately and found to our great sadness that your son was one of them. The observation post was a captured German one made of concrete, and, when we got there,

we found a direct hit had been made on it by a large German shell, breaking it in, and killing both the officers and wounding both the telephonists. Your son had clearly been killed



Oxley’s grave in 1917

instantly, and had a perfectly happy expression on his face. His glasses were hung around his neck and from his position I think he must have been in the act of observing our fire. I saw a good deal of your son during the three weeks

before his death we were constantly together on the march from our other position, and also as the two subalterns in the gunhut from Nov 25 to Dec 7th. During this time, as always, he was in wonderful spirits and the cheerful news of his companionship was the greatest possible blessing. When we went near Wytschaete he found a dog ‘Peter’, half Dachshund and half Spaniel, which he adopted and which still follows the Battery – it was very dejected when he did not return. The last days which your son spent out of action were in our wagon lines in two old farms near here; the position of these is on the slope which lies to the hill called ‘Mont Rouge’ on its North Eastern side. The last engagement he was in was the engagement near Polderhoek Chateau on Dec 3rd and it was in the operations between that battle and the German counter attack on Dec 14th that he fell.

We are indebted to the Oxley, O’Conor and Passmore families for their considerable help with this article.