

PERCIVAL HUGH EDENS

by Barry Burnham (May 2015)

Born in the parish of St. Barnabas, Percival Hugh Edens, who was possibly born in Cardigan Street; was born on August 19, 1884, with his baptism held just two months later at St. Barnabas Church on October 19. One of twelve children, Percival was the third of four sons born to George Edens (*born Nelson Street, Jericho, c.1854*) a plasterer by trade, and his wife, Ann Susannah Reeves, (*born Friars Street, St. Ebbes, c.1857*) a seamstress and tailoress. Married at Holy Trinity Church on Christmas Day 1876, George and Annie Edens had began their married life in the parish of Holy Trinity with their first son, George William born in Friars Street on September 20, 1877, and baptised at the nearby Holy Trinity Church. The remainder of the Edens family were all baptised in the neighbouring parishes of St. Paul and St. Barnabas following the birth of their daughter Annie in 1879. The birth of Annie was quickly followed by the arrival of more children beginning with Thomas in 1881, Edith 1883, Sydney 1886, Gertrude 1888, Elizabeth 1890, Louisa 1892, Kathleen 1893, and Rose in 1895, before the youngest child Eunice, was born in 1900. Sadly, the Edens family had also suffered a number of deaths whilst living in Jericho, with the death of four children; George William in 1890 aged 2, Sydney aged 4 in 1890, Louisa aged 3 months in 1892, and lastly Elizabeth who died sometime during the 1890s. First recorded as living at Sunnymead (*Summertown*) in April 1891, Percival was educated at the St. Barnabas Schools in lower Great Clarendon Street, and on the completion of his education, followed in his father's footsteps and became a plasterer by trade. Employed by Mr William Griffin, Percival appears on the 1901 census aged 16, living with his family at 47, Bridge Street in Osney. With the Edens family now complete, Percival was living with his parents; George, a plasterer aged 49, and Annie, a tailoress aged 44; plus a number of his siblings; Annie, employed as a tailoress aged 21, Edith, also a tailoress aged 18, Gertrude aged 12, Kathleen aged 7, Rose aged 5, and the youngest, Eunice aged 11 months. By the late summer of 1906, Percival had moved to Castle Street, and he was very soon to be married. Recorded at the nearby St. Peter-le-Bailey Church on October 20, 1906, Percival, aged 22 and employed as a plasterer, married Edith Cheer, a 22 year-old domestic servant of St. John's Road, in the neighbouring parish of St. Mary Magdalen. Born in the long since demolished Chaundy's Yard, (*off Littlegate Street*) Edith Harriett Cheer was born on May 18, 1885, the third daughter of a large family born to Alfred Cheer, a labourer and porter from Abingdon, and his wife Ellen Matilda (*nee Steane*). Following their marriage, Percival and Edith celebrated the birth of six children, the first; a son named William Percival was born at 32, Henley Street, (*off Iffley Road*) on May 14, 1907. The Edens family had moved home before the birth of their second child, a son named Albert Edward who was born in the area known as Cold Arbour (*off the Abingdon Road*) on August 21, 1908. Although it's known that the Edens family were living on the Abingdon Road in 1911, and Church Street, St Ebbes a few years later, it's unclear as to exactly where the four younger children were born. Gertrude Daisy; the first of two daughters, was born in Oxford during the summer of 1910, and John, the third son was likewise born in Oxford during the December quarter of 1911. Sadly John would be the first of two children to die in infancy, with his death recorded in the same quarter as his birth. Unfortunately the fourth son also died young. Stanley Edens was also born in Oxford in 1913, with his birth registered in the third quarter, and he died early the following year during the March quarter of 1914. The youngest of the Edens children was almost certainly born in St. Ebbes, with the birth of Gwendoline Edens recorded during the September quarter of 1915.

The 1911 census shows the Edens family living at 218, Abingdon Road, with Percival as the head of the family aged 26, employed as a plasterer. His wife Edith, at the age of 25, had no recorded occupation, and the three children alive at this point are recorded as William Percival aged 3, Albert Edward aged 2 and (*Beatrice*) Daisy aged 8 months. It appears that the Edens family had moved to St. Ebbes parish before the outbreak of war in August 1914, and almost certainly were living at 21, Church Street, when Percival enlisted in February 1915. Joining the ranks of the local regiment, the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, Percival Edens was originally attached to the 1/4th battalion as Pte 4341, and was first deployed to France with this battalion, possibly early in 1916, and may have seen action on the Somme in July/August 1916. Later attached to 'D' Coy, the 5th (Service) battalion, Oxford and Bucks L.I, Percival Edens was again sent to France on April 16, 1917. Attached to the 42nd brigade of the 14th (Light) Division, the Oxford and Bucks were south-east of Arras on May 3, and due to launch a dawn attack. At 3.45am on the day of his death (May 3, 1917) the 5th Oxford and Bucks attacked east of Arras with 'A & C' Coys leading and 'B & D' in support. As the battalion advanced they were struck by heavy machine gun fire from enemy positions at *St. Rohart Factory*, the *Quarry* and *Triangle Wood*. As a result of this action, the Germans were forced to retire about 40 yards before making a stand. At around 10.45am, the enemy counter attacked in six or seven waves of 150 to 200 men. Although cut down severely by the intense fire of the Oxford and Bucks men; the counter attack was ultimately successful, forcing the 5th battalion to retire to their original positions. The battalion casualty list for this failed attack was later shown as; 8 officers and 291 men killed or wounded from an already under strength battalion of 12 officers and 523 other ranks. Initially posted as missing in action; the death of Percival Edens was eventually confirmed as killed in action on May 3, 1917; however, as his body was not knowingly recovered from the blood-soaked battlefields of Northern France, his name was later commemorated on the Arras Memorial. Back home in Oxford, the Oxford Times was the first local newspaper to record his status with the following brief notice published on June 26, 1917: - *Missing, Pte P.H Edens, Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry, 21 Church Street, St Ebbes, missing*. Just two weeks later, the same newspaper up-dated his status on July 7, with a more informative report: *...Missing believed killed, - Pte Percival Hugh Edens, Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry, husband of Mrs Edens, 21 Church Street St Ebbes, and youngest son of Mrs Edens, 11, Wood Street, St Ebbes, was reported missing on May 3, at Bullecourt and is believed killed. He has seen over two years' service since joining in February 1915. He went to St Barnabas School and worked for 15 years for Mr William Griffin of Hayfield-road*. Just four days later, the long since defunct Oxford Journal Illustrated published a small photograph of Percival Edens on July 11, with a brief description below: - *Pte P.H. Edens, Oxford and Bucks Lt Infy, Church Street, Killed*. Twelve months after his death, the Oxford Times also published a memorial placed by his grieving family on May 4, 1918: - *Edens, - In loving memory of Pte P.H (Percy) Edens, Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry, dearly beloved husband of Edith Edens, 21 Church Street, and second son of Mrs Edens, 11 Wood Street, St Ebbes, who was killed in action May 3, 1917, in France aged 32 years from his sorrowing Wife and Children, Mother, Sister and Brother. "Could we have raised his dying head and heard his last farewell the blow would not have been so bad for those he loved so well. Yes he has gone, one of the best, and now for him we yearn, the only hope that is left to us now, is his brother's safe return"*. (Thomas Edens served with the OBLI and Army Ordinance Corps and returned home safely). The Commonwealth War Graves Commission holds the following information for Percival Hugh Edens, - Rank: Private, Regiment: 5th battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, Service No: 201496, Date of Death: 03/05/1917. Memorial: Arras Memorial, Ref: bay 6 and 7.

For his military service during the Great War, Percival was posthumously awarded the British War and Victory Medals, which along with his Death Plaque, (aka dead man's penny) are currently held in a collection of medals owned or retained by the Soldiers of Oxfordshire Trust at their new museum in Woodstock.

After the war, the parents of Percival Edens both died in Oxford, with his mother's death recorded in June 1924 aged 67. The death of his father, George Edens, was recorded during the March ¼ of 1934 aged 79. The widow of Percival Edens remarried just two years after his death, when she married Harold Slatter, a printer, aged 27, of Blackfriars Road, at St. Ebbes Church on June 21, 1919. Following her marriage, Edith had at least three more children, and later passed-away in Oxford, where her death was recorded during the September ¼ of 1957 at the age of 72. Of his surviving children, William Percival married his wife, Florence Phillips, in 1931, and he later died in Oxford, with his death recorded in the June ¼ 1980. The second son, Albert Edward married Winifred Nethaway in Oxford during the March ¼ of 1932. Albert Edens also died in 1980, although his death was recorded in the Bournemouth area during the December ¼, aged 72. The daughters of Percival Edens both appear to have disappeared without trace, and may have left Oxford. It's unclear if they eventually married, but it's almost certain that they died elsewhere.