

Valentine Joe Strudwick (pupil 1903 – c.1913)

St Paul's School's Boy Soldier

A major embarrassment to the military authorities during the First World War was the presence of boy soldiers at the Front. Officially, the minimum age for army recruits was 19, but children as young as 13 are known to have joined up, lying about their age in order to fight in the trenches against Germany.

One such young recruit was Valentine Joe Strudwick.



Born on 14 February 1900, Joe was the second of six surviving children of Jesse Strudwick, a gardener, and his second wife Louisa (nee Fuller), a laundress. Jesse's first wife, Ellen, had died leaving him with two small daughters – stepsisters to Joe.

When Joe was born the family lived in Falkland Road, moving later to Orchard Road.

At the tender age of three Joe started at the Falkland Road Infants' School, the Infants' School that had merged with St Paul's School in 1896, and he transferred to St Paul's School at the age of eight, where he would most likely have stayed until the age of 13.

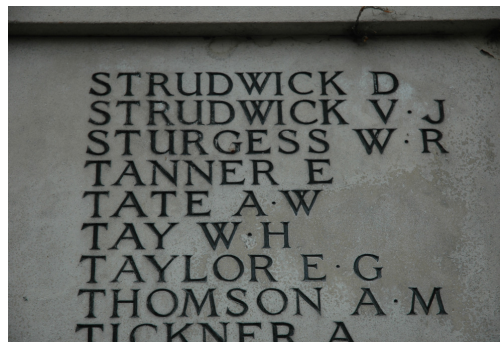
After leaving school, Joe is thought to have worked for his uncle, a local coal merchant. He may also have been a farm hand at a smallholding behind St Paul's School near the Glory Wood.

Like many others, however, Joe must have been struck by the persuasive recruitment campaigns run by the British Government from 1914 onwards - poster campaigns designed to encourage men to join up and serve their country. Hundreds of thousands answered the Government's call, including many young men who thought that army life would provide opportunities for travel and work that were not available at home. Some even thought it would be fun.

In January 1915, aged just 14, Joe enlisted, joining the 8th Battalion the Rifle Brigade, part of the 14th (Light) Division - the battalion for volunteer soldiers. He was most probably trained at Winchester, and after only a few weeks' preparation he was sent, with his Battalion, to the trenches at Boezinge near Ypres in Belgium.

Conditions in the trenches were horrendous. They were muddy and filthy. Constant shellfire from enemy lines across 'no man's land' meant soldiers died on a daily basis. Thousands more died in the major battles for the nearby town of Ypres.

Joe died on 14 January 1916, not in any major battle but in the daily rounds of firing between Germany and the Allies. He was just 15 years, 11 months old. He is buried in Essex Farm Cemetery, near Ypres, and honoured on the Rolls of Honour in both St Paul's and St Martin's churches, and on the War Memorial in South Street.



Dorking War Memorial, South Street

Joe's death has become a symbol of the lunacy of the First World War and the shameful use of such young boys at the Front. His grave is now one of the most visited in any of the First World War cemeteries.



Essex Farm Cemetery - then



Essex Farm Cemetery – now

Another Dorking lad has achieved honour by laying down his life for his country.

Pte. Valentine Joe Strudwick, of the 8th Rifle Brigade, joined up twelve months ago last January, and at the time of his death, on Jan. 14th he had not reached his sixteenth birthday, he having been born on St. Valentine's Day, 1900.

His mother would naturally have liked to have kept him out of the Army for at least a year or two, but young Strudwick would not have it – a fine example to those of maturer years who have not yet joined, and perhaps a reproach!

With only six weeks' training the lad was sent over to France. Within a short time he lost two of his chums who were standing near him – both instantaneously killed. The shock was such, with the addition of being badly gassed, that he was sent home and was for three months in hospital at Sheerness. On recovering he rejoined his regiment in France, and this week his mother received the following letter from his commanding officer, dated Jan. 15th:

'I am very sorry indeed to have to inform you that your son was killed by a shell on Jan. 14th. His death was quite instantaneous and painless and his body was carried by his comrades to a little cemetery behind the lines, where it was reverently buried this morning. A cross is being made and will shortly be erected on his grave. Rifleman Strudwick had earned the goodwill and respect of his comrades and of his officers, and we are very sorry indeed to lose so good a soldier. On their behalf as well as my own I offer you our sincere sympathy.'

The deceased was Mrs Strudwick's second surviving son, and her grief is the greater because of the fact that she had not been able to see him since he joined the Army. She has another son in the Royal Field Artillery.

Young Strudwick was an old St. Paul's boy."

Dorking Advertiser - 22 January 1916