3. Lieutenant Hon. Edward Charles Hardinge, DSO, age 22

The beginning of war in Europe

August 1914. A relatively small force (the British Expeditionary Force) joins the French in Northern France. The initial few months of the Great War on the Western Front involved the advance of the German army to the Marne, close to Paris, and then its defeat and repulse back to the Aisne in Northern France. The BEF saw its first major action at Mons on August 23rd, from which it was forced to retreat, skirmishing along the way, particularly at Le Cateau. This retreat, for the rest of August, was halted together with the French at the Battle of the Marne on 6th September. After advance back north to the Aisne, both armies moved westwards to Flanders where the recognisable trench warfare began.

Edward Hardinge fought in the earliest period of the war. He was awarded the DSO, probably the first in the war, “for ability and gallantry in reconnaissance under great difficulty and machine gun fire on 22nd, 23rd and 27th August.” He had remained undetected for some time in a German occupied village in the church tower on reconnaissance duties, and latterly helped rescue a company of the Royal Munsters, when he was hit and mortally wounded by machine gun fire. Just three companies of the 2nd Battalion of The Royal Munsters supported by a couple of field guns halted the advance of the German Army for fourteen hours in the area of Oisny and Étreux, an action whose bravery was saluted by their German counterparts when they finally succumbed, having run out of ammunition. He later died from blood poisoning on 18th December at Priory House, Folkestone.

He is buried in Fordcombe Church, and is also commemorated by a carved inscription inside the church.

The retreat from Mons represented the first introduction of the British to the War. It was a sobering moment. Although before the appearance of the now familiar trenches, the industrial scale of the destruction and loss of life quickly put paid to any romantic notions. At another rear-guard action in the retreat, at Le Cateau on 25th August, Bertie Trevor of the Yorkshires, wrote in his notebook,

“This is too terrible for words…Until one has been for hours pelted at with lyddite and shrapnel, machine guns and rifles, one cannot understand war. Where the fun comes in, I don’t know.”

The pattern was set for the long attritional years of trench warfare.