

# From Buckingham Street to the Western Front

IN THE FIRST OF A TWO-PART SERIES, LAS FALLON RECOUNTS THE LIFE OF SERGEANT PATRICK BRUTON, A FORMER MEMBER OF DUBLIN FIRE BRIGADE AND THE IRISH GUARDS, WHO SERVED IN WORLD WAR I.

*We're not so old on the Army List,  
but we're not so new in the ring,  
for we carried our packs for Marshall Saxe  
when Louis was our King.  
But Douglas Haig's our Marshall now  
and we're King George's men,  
and after one hundred and seventy years  
we're fighting for France again!*

....  
*Old days! The wild geese are flying,  
head to the storm as we faced it before!  
For where there are Irish there's bound to be fighting,  
and when there's no fighting, its Ireland no more!  
(‘The Irish Guards’, Rudyard Kipling, 1918)*

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), ‘the poet of the Empire’ and author of *The Jungle Book* among many other works, is not the first person you would think of writing a poem to eulogise an Irish regiment of the British Army. Kipling was a staunch Unionist and despised nationalist Catholic Ireland from where the Irish regiments mainly drew their recruits. In his books the Irish characters are caricatures, ‘broths of Oirish bhoys’ looking for the chance to give their lives for Queen and country in the far outposts of the British Empire. On the outbreak of war in 1914 Kipling pulled strings to obtain a commission for his son John (Jack). In spite of Kipling’s contacts in the highest level of British society, his son was rejected for service due to very poor eyesight. Kipling approached his friend Field Marshal Lord Roberts and obtained a commission for John in the Irish Guards, of which Lord Roberts was Colonel. After the war, Kipling was approached by the regiment and asked to write their official history. His work, *The Irish Guards in the Great War* in two volumes – one each for the first and second battalions – are fine books. They serve as a memorial to Second Lieutenant Jack Kipling, who was killed in action in 1915 on his first day in combat.



Fireman Patrick Bruton. (Photo: Las Fallon collection).

## BEGINNING THE SEARCH

On November 25th 2009, I received an email from a lady in England who was researching her husband’s family history and knew that his great-grandfather had served in the Dublin Fire Brigade. Yvonne Houghton told me the name of the fireman she was trying to trace and I was able to tell her that the man, Fireman Patrick Bruton, was a serving member of DFB in 1914 when he and another

fireman, John Murphy, had left to serve in the British Army. Both men returned to DFB in 1919 and continued to serve in the Brigade. However, their story had been largely lost to history; until now.

We have exchanged emails and information and indulged in some historical detective work on both sides of the Irish Sea, which has filled out the story of this man and given us an insight into some normally hidden history. Historical records of the early years of the DFB can be hard to come by. In 1938, Major Comerford, the new chief officer of DFB applied for, and was granted, permission to destroy old records held by the DFB. Among the many casualties of this purge was the early personnel records of the Brigade. These were a huge loss to historians as was the culture, which seems to have become ingrained from this period on, of destroying old records and material.

I was aware of the names of the men who went in 1914 and knew that a photograph of Patrick Bruton was available in a group photo taken around 1926, of which I had a copy. The starting point for any modern research on DFB history is always Tom Geraghty and Trevor Whitehead's book on DFB history. Yvonne was aware of it and arranged to get a copy. My initial assumption was that the two DFB men would have served in a non-combat unit where their skills as firemen could be put to use, possibly the Royal Army Medical Corps or the Army Service Corps. I was convinced that they could not have been combat infantrymen as so few of those would have survived four years of trench warfare. We were concentrating on Patrick Bruton and Yvonne used a number of specialised military history websites to try and trace him and his service records.

Yvonne is an experienced and very good genealogist and I have done some work in tracing the records of early DFB firemen so we both knew some basic ground rules; like the fact that the term 'fireman' on documents pre World War I usually indicates that the man was most likely a stoker on a ship or steam train and not a member of a fire brigade. The first hit through the military websites threw up a William Bruton of Inchicore. This Bruton was listed as 'captain of fire brigade' and joined the Dublin Fusiliers in 1916, later transferring to the Royal Artillery. A quick check showed that he seemed to be a member of the fire brigade in the railway works in Inchicore and had no connection to the DFB. By early December, Yvonne had found what

turned out to be a hugely significant piece of information which indicated that a Patrick Bruton of Buckingham Street, Dublin had served in the Irish Guards in the years concerned. I was able to make contact with the Irish Guards' Association here in Dublin and get a contact name in the Irish Guards' Museum which I passed on to Yvonne.

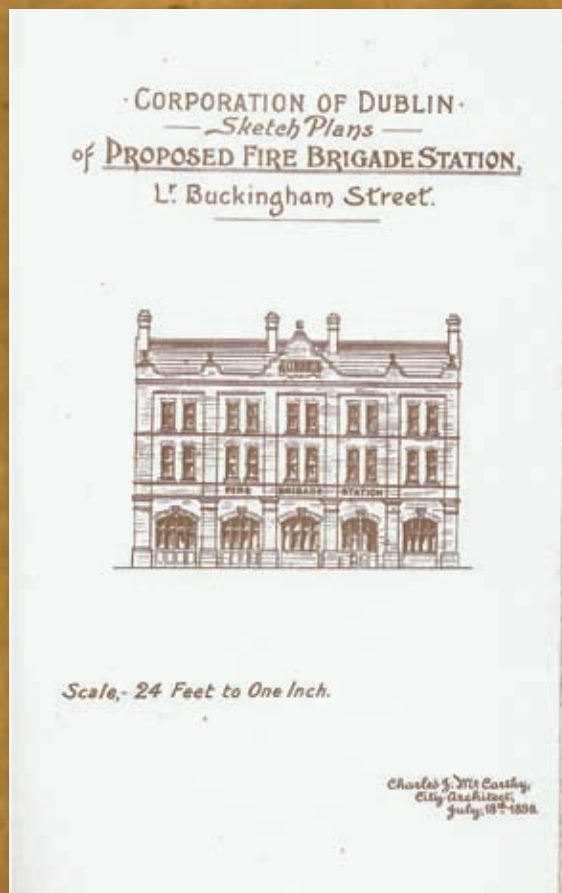
### PIECING THE PUZZLE TOGETHER

In the early months of 2010 a number of other pieces of the jigsaw started to fall into place. I discovered that Bruton's son, James, had also served in DFB. Yvonne discovered a brother, Martin, who served in the Dublin Metropolitan Police and I contacted the Garda Museum to try and trace his records. (The Garda Museum also hold records for both the Royal Irish Constabulary and the DMP). Martin's service record with the DMP gave his place of birth as Clonmellon, Co. Meath, which opened up the possibility of tracing family history through church records for the parish, as it turned out the parish records date back to 1775.

At this time, I also found James Bruton's full DFB service record which gave further valuable information on the family. I also found a 1919 claim from the Dublin Fire Brigademen's Union (DFBU) on behalf of Patrick Bruton claiming £60 in back wages for the period of the war. In 1914, Dublin Corporation, in a patriotic act designed to aid recruiting to the British Army, had undertaken to give half pay to the dependents of employees who volunteered for military service and guarantee to hold their positions open for them. The main piece of the jigsaw fell into place in early February 2010 when Yvonne received

Bruton's service record from the Irish Guards' regimental museum. This was indeed our man, and the wealth of information in the service records painted a very full picture of his life and military service during World War I.

When I received a copy of the records from Yvonne, I realised that some of the abbreviations and terminology used would need clarification. I contacted retired DFB station officer and former Irish Guardsman, Tom Healy, and asked him for help. As anyone who knows Tom will testify, he is the embodiment of the phrase 'a scholar and a gentleman'. Tom talked me through the records and turned 'military English' into plain English and I am indebted to him for his assistance with the project.



**Above:** An architect's drawing of Buckingham Street Fire Station in the late 19th century.



**Clockwise from top left:** British casualty party, France 1916; British troops in the trenches awaiting attack, 1917; DFB brass helmet from the period; Turntable ladder in Dorset Street, Dublin, circa 1900; Irish Guards machine gun section (1914). All of the men in this photo were killed in the war.

## THE WAR YEARS

Aside from the facts which were found within the records, Patrick Bruton's decision to join the British Army in 1914 brought up some interesting sidelines. Dublin in 1914 was a city of poverty and deprivation. The great lockout of 1913 was not long over and the city and country was involved in the crisis around the Home Rule Act, which was due to come into force and would provide a separate parliament for Ireland, albeit still as part of the British Empire. In the north, and among the Unionist population of the south, the move would be bitterly opposed. The Ulster Volunteer Force, founded in 1912, had recently imported arms from the continent to oppose any attempt by the government in London to impose Home Rule.

The upper levels of the British Army in Ireland made their sympathies clear. In March 1914, officers of the Irish Command based at the Curragh Camp let it be known to the government that they would not take part in operations to impose Home Rule. The response to the Curragh mutiny was that officers with Irish connections would be excused from taking part in any operations. Officers of the British Army's Irish Command threatened to resign en masse if ordered north. The UVF had landed thousands of rifles and ammunition at Larne and other northern ports with a blind eye being turned by the authorities. No such blind eye was turned when the National Volunteers imported arms into Howth on July 4th 1914. An attempt by the police and military to seize the rifles was unsuccessful. A unit of the Kings Own Scottish Borderers, returning to their barracks, opened fire on a crowd in Dublin city centre in response to stone throwing by a section of the crowd. Four people were killed and several were wounded. This then was the situation in Dublin in 1914. It was, in Sean O'Casey's words in the

*Plough and the Stars*, a city 'rotten ripe for revolution'.

On the declaration of war on September 18th 1914 the Home Rule bill was passed into law but suspended for the duration of the war. The war changed the political priorities of Ireland. The National Volunteers split on the issue of enlisting in the British Army and the break away group, the Irish Volunteers, along with the trade union militia, the Irish Citizen Army, began to train and prepare for an armed uprising against British rule. The majority, however, followed the advice of John Redmond, leader of the Nationalist party, and joined the British forces.

The recruiting sergeants were busy in Dublin in those early days of the war. Thousands joined the army either through patriotism, a desire to protect small nations like Belgium from the aggression of her larger neighbour or, quite often, to avoid the starvation and quiet desperation of life in Dublin's slums. Dublin, like the rest of the United Kingdom had its own local regiment which recruited within the catchment area. In the case of Dublin this was the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. The Dublin Fusiliers had a long history and the city had recognised their record and sacrifice in South Africa during the Boer War by erecting the 'Fusiliers Arch' at the entrance to Stephen's Green. This memorial carries the names of the regiment's dead from the Boer War and lists the actions in which they fought. It was also possible for recruits with specific trades or qualification to apply for other regiments and corps of the British Army including the Royal Army Medical Corps or the Army Service Corps which provided the transport and tradesmen for the military.

## IRISH GUARDS

There was another alternative and it was the one which Patrick Bruton took. On April 5th 1900, Queen Victoria 'was graciously pleased to command that an Irish



**Clockwise from above:** British Victory Medal, Princess Mary box (sent to troops in 1914 with cigarettes and chocolate and DFB cap badge); Leyland motor in Tara St, 1909; South of Ireland troops, circa 1918 (courtesy of National Library of Scotland).

regiment of Foot Guards be formed. The regiment will be designated the Irish Guards'. The Irish Guards formed part of the Brigade of Guards along with the Grenadier, Coldstream, Scots and Welsh Guards. It was considered to be an elite unit of the British Army and this was the regiment which fireman Patrick Bruton of Buckingham Street Fire Station joined on September 5th 1914, being posted to the depot at Caterham where he arrived on September 8th 1914. His date of enlistment actually pre-dates the announcement of war but a far more significant fact for the historian is that on his attestation papers he gives his age as 34. On the 1911 census return 'Fire-brigade man' Patrick Bruton of Buckingham Street, Dublin gives his age as 35. Bruton was actually 38 in 1914 and falsified his age to appear younger and presumably better able for the rigours of life in an elite infantry battalion.

Bruton was posted to the first battalion Irish Guards and would have received his training at the regimental depot at Warley in Essex. He was identified from an early stage as a potential NCO and was promoted to lance corporal on January 1st 1915. Another promotion came on April 22nd 1915 when Bruton was promoted to lance sergeant. Such rapid promotion was partly as a result of the expansion of the British Army establishment due to the war, but is also a reflection of the high casualty rates in the fighting on the Western Front. The small pre-war professional British Army of 1914 was being decimated in the fighting in northern France and Belgium. Reservists and new recruits were being trained and sent to the front while the 'new army' battalions, which had been formed from the recruits of late 1914 and early 1915, were being trained and equipped. The Irish Guards had regular drafts of recruits from Warley.

It was Bruton's turn to be drafted for service in France. On August 16th 1915 he was posted to the first battalion Irish Guards as part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) fighting in France. Bruton arrived in France

as part of the build up of the unit in preparation for the battle of Loos. That battle was to gain its place among the calvaries of the Great War along with Ypres, the Somme, Gallipoli and so many others, Loos earned its reputation as one of the great set piece battles designed to overwhelm the German defences on the Western Front and change the course of the war, but which degenerated into a killing field for young men from both sides. They died in their thousands for gains which could be measured in yards. It was the battle where Jack Kipling died. It was also the place where, on October 5th 1915, Patrick Bruton was seriously wounded. He was admitted to hospital at the British base at Etaples suffering from gunshot wounds to his left arm, head and scalp. After treatment there he was shipped back to England and admitted to the War Hospital in Stoke on Trent. Bruton's wounds were serious and it was a full year before he was posted back to the BEF. In the meantime, the event that was to change the course of Irish history had come to pass...

**Part II of this article will appear in the next issue of *Firecall*.**

#### REFERENCES

1. Rudyard Kipling, *The Irish Guards in the Great War* (Kent, 1997), pp 21-2.
2. Tom Geraghty and Trevor Whitehead, *The Dublin Fire Brigade: a History of the Fires and the Emergencies* (Dublin, 2004), p 218.
3. Yvonne's research has established that Patrick was born on March 17th 1876 in Milltown, Co. Meath
4. Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles* (London, 1996) pp 17-9.
5. Jim Herlihy, *The Royal Irish Constabulary* (Dublin, 1997) p 98.
6. It has not been possible, as yet, to identify the date on which Patrick joined DFB. He does not appear as a fireman on the 1901 census but did appear on the census as a furniture porter, living in Charlemont Street, Dublin.