

Corporal John Curtis©
Regimental number: 55308
111th Railway Troops, Royal Engineers

born: 1886–died: 6 May 1918

Lance Corporal John Curtis was the youngest child of William and Emma (nee Bester) Curtis. Sadly, his mother died when he was just a few months old. John was probably born about the summer of 1886 in North Witchford, Cambridgeshire,¹ and Emma died in North Witchford at the beginning of 1887.² She was born in Warboys, Huntingdon, in about 1851 and died at the age of about 36.³ She married William Curtis, who was born in Doddington, Cambridgeshire, in about 1850,⁴ on 25 April 1872 in Doddington.⁵ They had eight children before Emma's untimely death:

- Elizabeth (born in 1873)⁶
- Matthew (born on 28 June 1876)⁷
- Martha (born on 10 May 1877)⁸
- William (born on 5 January 1880)⁹
- Henry (born on 17 July 1881)¹⁰
- Frederick (born in 1883 but died in 1885)¹¹
- Emily Jane (born on 2 Sep 1884)¹²
- John

In 1881, the family was living on High Street in Doddington, where William was an agricultural labourer.¹³ Ten years later, William was on his own with six of his children. They had moved just around the corner to Ingle's Lane. His eldest daughter Elizabeth, at the age of 17, was the family's housekeeper. Martha was a domestic servant elsewhere, but living at home, and Matthew, an agricultural labourer like his father, was boarding in the home of Robert Kimpton, less than a mile away. The other children were in school.¹⁴

In 1901, only two children were left at home—Emily, who was now the family's housekeeper, and John, who had joined his father as an agricultural labourer. They were still living on Ingle's Lane. John's brother William was living with his sister Martha and her new husband Edward Hart.

By 1911, most of John's siblings had married.

- Martha had married Edward Hart in 1897¹⁵ and, in 1911, John's father was living with Martha, her husband and two sons at Ingle's Corner.¹⁶
- John and his brother Matthew had moved to London. John was living with Matthew, his wife Harriet Hannah and their three children at 111 Peabody Cottages, Rosendale Road, in Herne Hill, London. John was now a platelayer for a railway company. His brother Matthew was a postman.¹⁷
- William was a farm labourer and boarding with Fanny Ellington and her children on High Street, Doddington.¹⁸
- Henry and his wife Martha were living with their four children on Church Lane in Doddington.¹⁹
- Emily Jane had married Benjamin Young in 1908²⁰ and, in 1911, they were living at New Street Chatteris, in Cambridgeshire, with two children.²¹

It is not known what became of John's sister Elizabeth after 1891. His father died in 1912 in North Witchford.²²

John enlisted in the Royal Engineers (RE) on 18 November 1914 and served with the 111th Railway Troops.²³ He had served previously with the 4th Suffolk Militia but was purchased out on 17 January 1906. When he enlisted, he was a platelayer for the South Eastern & Chatham Railway. As such, he was certainly well suited to serve with the railway troops. At the beginning of the Great War there were only two regular and three special reserve RE railway companies, and it became clear that this would not be sufficient for railway transport requirements. Additional railway construction units were organized. Since a large number of British railway company employees were volunteering for military service, many were selected for service with the railway units.²⁴

The headquarters of the railway companies was Longmoor, Hampshire, and recruits were sent there for training. From the outbreak of the war until the end, nearly 1,700 officers and 66,000 Other Ranks were sent overseas from Longmoor.

Railway companies were engaged all over the British sector; each construction train to which the sappers were assigned would have up to two complete railway companies, enabling them to move both soldiers and equipment to and from each work site. The R.E. labour companies prepared the ground for the platelaying sappers. "A primary objective was always to take standard gauge railways as close to the front as possible, to lessen the demands on light railway systems, horsed transport and manpower."²⁵

The 111th Railway Troops embarked for France on 15 February 1915 and John was with them.²⁶ When he went overseas, he was promoted to lance corporal. Just over a year later—on 17 March 1916—he was promoted to corporal.

He survived over three years of the war but, on 4 May 1918, he was admitted to No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station with shrapnel wounds to his back. He died there two days later and was buried the same day in Pernes Military Cemetery (Grave 2 Plot 2. Row B), with the Canadian chaplain G. C. d'Easum presiding.²⁷

Pernes British Military Cemetery was only set up in April 1918 when No. 1 and No. 4 CCCSs came to Pernes, driven back by the German advance.²⁸ John was one of 185 soldiers admitted on 4 May²⁹ and one of 173 men from the railway companies who died in the Great War.³⁰

It would have been a sad duty for the chaplain to send a letter to John's wife of a few months to notify her of husband's death. John had married Emma May Bishop in London on 22 January 1918 at the Registry Office in Lambeth,³¹ presumably while on leave. She was living at 111 Peabody Cottage in Herne Hill, which is where John had been living with his brother Matthew before the war. Emma received the monies owing to John from the army upon his death.³²

Emma was born in 1893³³ and baptized in Ightham, Kent, on 27 August 1893, the daughter of John Samuel and Harriet Ann Bishop.³⁴ Before the war, Emma was working as a domestic/cook in the home of the Hobbs family at 11 Cumberland Road in Kew.³⁵ After her husband's death, she joined the Women's Royal Navy Service (known as the "Wrens"). She enlisted on 16 September 1918 and served as a steward until 19 September 1919. Her character was described as "very good" and her ability as "superior."³⁶

Initially John's next of kin was his brother Matthew. However, after his marriage it was changed to his wife. After her husband's death, in 1919, she indicated to the army that John had no siblings and no nieces or nephews.³⁷ Yet he did. Perhaps there had not been time for Emma to meet her new husband's family.

In 1939, their residences were as follows:

- Matthew was a retired postman and living at the Brickmaker's Arms Inn in North Witchford. He died in 1940;³⁸
- Martha and her husband were living at the Store & Hounds Inn on High Street in North Witchford. She died in 1955;³⁹
- William was an agricultural farm labourer and living with his wife Lily and their daughter on Newgate Street in North Witchford. He had married Lily Wilmer in 1914;⁴⁰
- Henry was a coal hawker and living on Wimblington Road in North Witchford. He died in 1943;⁴¹ and
- Emily Jane and her husband Benjamin Young, who she married in 1908,⁴² were living on Ransonmoor, North Witchford.⁴³

After the war, John's family continued to live in North Witchford.

John's wife Emma does not appear to have remarried and was probably living in Poplar, London, in 1939 and working in a canteen.⁴⁴

John was awarded posthumously the British War Medal (for service overseas between 1914 and 1918), the Victory Medal (for service in an operational theatre) and the 1914–15 Star (for service in the war against Germany between 5 August 1914 and 31 December 1915).⁴⁵

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³ "1881 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 5 May 2019), entry for William Curtis, Registration district: North Witchford, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 11, Piece: 1689, Folio: 72, Page: 38

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "England, Select Marriages, 1538–1973," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 29 May 2019), entry for William Curtis, FHL film number: 1040459

⁶ "GRO online index–birth," *General Register Office* (<http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/>: accessed 17 June 2019), entry for Curtis, Elizabeth, Registration district: North Witchford, Volume 03B, Page 575

⁷ "1939 England and Wales Register," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 3 June 2019), entry for Matthew Curtis, Schedule number: 154, Sub-schedule Number: 1, Enumeration district: TDCB, Registration district: 185-1

⁸ "1939 Register," *Findmypast* (www.findmypast.co.uk: accessed 3 June 2019), entry for Martha Hart, Reference: RG101/6343H/009/11, Letter code: TDCB

⁹ "1939 Register," *Findmypast* (www.findmypast.co.uk: accessed 3 June 2019), entry for William Curtis, Reference: RG101/6343G/007/32, Letter code: TDCA

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- ¹⁵ "England & Wales Marriages 1837–2005," *Findmypast* (www.findmypast.co.uk: accessed 3 June 2019), entry for Martha Curtis, District: North Witchford, County: Cambridgeshire, Volume: 3B, Page: 1207
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- ²³ "British Army WWI Service Records, 1914–1920," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 18 June 2019), entry for John Curtis. Unless otherwise noted, all information about John's military career comes from this source.
- ²⁴ "Railway Construction Companies of the Royal Engineers," *The Long, Long Trail* (<https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/army/regiments-and-corps/the-corps-of-royal-engineers-in-the-first-world-war/railway-construction-companies-of-the-royal-engineers/>: accessed 3 June 2019). Unless otherwise specified all general information about the railway companies comes from this source.
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- ²⁶ "British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914–1920," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 5 May 2019), entry for John Curtis
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- ⁴³ "1939 Register," *Findmypast* (www.findmypast.co.uk: accessed 3 June 2019), entry for Emily Jane Young, Reference: RG101/6343H/006/15, Letter code: TDCA
- ⁴⁴ "1939 England and Wales Register," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 3 June 2019), entry for Emma Curtis, Schedule number: 163, Sub-schedule Number: 4, Enumeration district: AQNQ, Registration district: 19/2
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