

Private John Frederick Bower©
Regimental number: G/6342
8th Queen's Own (Royal West Kent) Regiment

born: 1890–died: 8 April 1916

John Frederick Bower was born in Islington, London, England, in 1890; it was likely in the summer, as his birth was registered in the third quarter (July–September).¹ He was the fourth child and fourth son of George Bower and Mary Ann, née Cross,² who had married at St. Andrew's Parish Church, Islington, on 28 September 1884.³ George, described in the 1891 Census as a mercantile clerk, was a Londoner, born and bred; Mary Ann was from Tregantle, Cornwall.⁴

In 1891, John and his brothers, George William Edward (born in 1885), William John Hensley (born in 1887) and Edward Wiggin (born in 1889), lived with their parents and their paternal grandmother at 4 Vansittart Road, West Ham, Essex.⁵ West Ham, a separate borough at the time, was incorporated into Greater London in 1965.⁶ By 1901 the family, reduced in size after the death of John's brother Edward in 1898,⁷ had moved to nearby 263 Cann Hall Road.⁸ According to the 1911 Census, which describes George Sr. as working in a diamond merchant's office, William as a bookkeeper and John as working in a woollen warehouse, the family was living at 276 Cann Hall Road.⁹ John's eldest brother George Jr. may have already immigrated to South Africa, where he became a diamond dealer.¹⁰

John enlisted with the Queen's Own (Royal West Kent) Regiment on 30 April 1915.¹¹ His attestation papers describe him as 25 years of age, 5 feet 10 inches tall, weighing 146 pounds and generally physically fit. He indicated that he was a tailor by occupation. Both his parents were alive when he enlisted, as they are both identified as his next of kin; unfortunately, his father passed away on 20 October 1915.¹² The day after his enlistment John was posted to the 3rd (Reserve) Battalion for training at the Royal West Kent's regimental depot at Maidstone, Kent. Two days before Christmas he joined the Regiment's 8th (Service) Battalion at Bonningues-les-Ardres, France, where they were in rest billets.¹³ On 5 January 1916 the battalion was sent forward to Ouderdom, Belgium, west of Ypres. In February and early March, they were in and out of the Ypres Salient's Railway Wood and Sanctuary Wood trenches. On 21 March, the battalion moved southwest to Berthen, France, where they relieved the 4th Canadian Battalion on the night of 27 March.

At the beginning of April, the 8th Battalion of the Royal West Kents was once again in Belgium, at Wulverghem. At 5:20 a.m. on 8 April, while the battalion was in reserve near Wulverghem a shell from a German field howitzer hit one of its encampments, killing eight men and wounding five more.¹⁴ Private John Frederick Bower was among those who died. According to the records of the resident chaplain at No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station, John suffered wounds to the abdomen and passed away on 8 April 1916 with letters to his mother in his pocket.¹⁵ There is some inconsistency in other records: his service record and his file with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission¹⁶ cite two different death dates: 6 April and 8 April. His headstone in the Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension (Plot II, D 212), in the Pas-de-Calais region of northern France, is engraved with 6 April 1916 above the words, "Nearer My God to Thee."¹⁷



Private J. F. Bower's headstone
Source: FindaGrave.com

John was awarded the British War Medal (for service overseas between 1914 and 1918) and the Victory Medal (for service in an operational theater).¹⁸

Mary Ann Bower, John's mother, lived in West Ham until her death in 1935.¹⁹

As noted above, John's brother George appears to have immigrated to South Africa some time before 1915. According to the passenger list when he returned to England that year, he had with him his wife, Eleanor, and his one-year-old daughter, Dorothy. The family made several trips to England during the 1930s,^{20,21,22,23} perhaps in conjunction with his work in the diamond trade. George returned alone in 1954,²⁴ a retired widower, and again in 1960.²⁵ He died on 17 August 1968 in Johannesburg, South Africa.²⁶

John's other brother William John Hensley also served. In fact, he was the first of the brothers to sign on, enlisting on 1 December 1914; however, he spent the war in England with the Army Pay Corps.²⁷ William married Lillian Victoria Nuttall on 25 August 1915²⁸ and together they had three children (Muriel,²⁹ Irene,³⁰ and Eric³¹). William predeceased his wife, passing away on 17 April 1954;³² Lillian lived on until the fall of 1967.³³

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¹ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for John Frederick Bower, Registration district: Islington, Inferred county: London, Volume: 1b Page: 355

² "1891 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for John F. Bower, Civil parish: West Ham, Town: West Ham, County: Essex

³ "London, England, Marriages and Banns, 1754–1932," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for George Bower, Parish: St. Andrew, Barnsbury, Islington, County: Middlesex, Register type: Parish register

⁴ "1891 England Census," *Ancestry*, entry for John F. Bower

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "West Ham," *Wikipedia* (www.wikipedia.org: accessed 9 April 2020)

⁷ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for Edward Wiggin Bower, Registration district: West Ham, Inferred county: Essex, Volume: 4a, Page: 159

⁸ "1901 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for John F. Bower, Registration district: West Ham, Sub-registration district: South Leyton, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 17, Piece: 1611, Folio: 111, Page: 13, Household schedule number: 78

⁹ "1911 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for John Frederick Bower, Registration district: West Ham, Registration district number: 188, Sub-registration district: South Leyton, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 20, Piece: 9625

¹⁰ "UK and Ireland, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878–1960," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for Mr. G. W. Bower, Official number: 129074

¹¹ "British Army Service Records 1914–1920," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for John Frederick Bower. Unless otherwise specified, all information about his military service comes from this source.

¹² "England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858–1966," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 10 April 2020), entry for George Bower

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- ¹³ "8 Battalion Queen's Own (Royal West Kent Regiment) War Diaries," *The National Archives* (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/: accessed 8 May 2020), Date: 1915 Aug–1919 Apr, Reference: WO 95/1616/2. Note: All further references to the battalion's movements come from this source.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for Bower, J.F.
- ¹⁶ "Commonwealth War Graves Commission (www.cwgc.org: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for Bower, J.F., Service No: G/6342
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ "British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914–1920," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for John Frederick Bower
- ¹⁹ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1916–2007," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for Mary A Bower, Registration district: West Ham, Inferred county: Essex, Volume: 4a, Page: 2
- ²⁰ "UK and Ireland, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878–1960," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for George Bower
- ²¹ "UK and Ireland, Outward Passenger Lists, 1890–1960," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for George Wm. Edward Bower, Official number: 135509
- ²² "U.S., Border Crossings from Canada to the U.S., 1895–1960," Arrival date: 22 August 1936, Port of arrival: Niagara Falls, N.Y., entry for George William Edward Bower. Note: The image indicates that the visa was issued in London, England, on 4 August 1936 and that the family were in transit to San Francisco before departing for Johannesburg, South Africa.
- ²³ "UK and Ireland, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878–1960," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for George Bower, Official number: 164570
- ²⁴ "UK and Ireland, Outward Passenger Lists, 1890–1960," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for Mr. G. W. E. Bower, Official number: 57327
- ²⁵ "UK and Ireland, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878–1960," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for G. W. E. Bower, Official number: 4732/20
- ²⁶ "England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858–1995," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for George William Edward Bower
- ²⁷ "British Army WWI Pension Records 1914–1920," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for Wm. John Hensley Bower, Regimental number: 4055, Form title: Cover for Discharge Documents
- ²⁸ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for William J. H. Bower, Registration district: West Ham, Inferred county: Essex, Volume: 4a, Page: 437
- ²⁹ "Essex, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813–1918," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for Muriel Victoria Bower, Birth date: 11 November 1916, Baptism date: 10 December 1916, Baptism place: Plaistow, St. Mary the Virgin, Essex, England,
- ³⁰ "British Army WWI Pension Records 1914–1920," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for Irene Bower, Form title: Award Sheet, First Award
- ³¹ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1916–2007," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 13 April 2020), entry for Eric G. H. Bower, Registration district: West Ham, Inferred county: Essex, Volume: 4a, Page: 149
- ³² "England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858–1995," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 2 April 2020), entry for William John Hensley Bower
- ³³ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1916–2007," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 13 April 2020), entry for Lilian V Bower, Registration district: Barnet, Inferred county: Greater London, Volume: 5a, Page: 94